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“Greed!”

Now was the time to unleash the power I had earned after devouring Haniel—Greed’s Third Level, the black shield.

As my sword transformed into the black shield, the full impact of the dragon’s roar hit us. The force was unlike anything I had ever known, pushing through the black shield into both my arms and down my legs. It forced me backward, but I dug in. Somehow, I could bear this power.

The energy of the roar bashed into the shield, fractured into a rainbow of light, and dissipated into the air.

"Corpse, have you ever been to the capital?"

If I wanted to be honest, I needed to tell her that I had. I didn't want to tell her I'd left the city and headed to Galia in pursuit of her. I wasn't sure whether I should avoid this conversation or lie again. I couldn't know what topics might come up, and whether I'd slip up on any of them. Although it was probably fine to fudge a little.

"Yeah, I've been to Seifort," I said cautiously.

"Ah, so you have! In that case, do you know of a tavern in the Merchant District? The one called Encounter? It's a bit cramped, but it's got such a lovely warmth!"

Uh… Now she was talking about the very tavern I'd taken her to, back on our one excursion. I nodded tentatively.

Lady Roxy went on happily.

BERSERK OF GLUTTONY

NOVEL III

WRITTEN BY
ISSHIKI ICHIKA

ILLUSTRATED BY
FAME

Seven Seas Entertainment

BOSHOKU NO BERUSERUKU
-OREDAKE LEVEL TO IU GAINEN WO TOPPA SURU - VOL. 3

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Illustrations by fame

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Chapter 1:
Reunion with the White Holy Knight

AFTER PARTING WAYS with Myne, I headed north alone to the sentinel city of Babylon. Sunset was already falling over the lands of Galia, and I wanted to be safely within Babylon's walls before dark. Fortune was on my side this time; I reached the Galian border without encountering any monster stampedes.

To call Galia "the country of death" would not have been an understatement. From where I stood on the Galian side of the border, the desolate wasteland behind me was pungent with the stench of blood. On the other side of the border was the Kingdom of Seifort, where the land lay unravaged. In Seifort, pockets of flowers grew from the earth and danced in the wind.

I took a step across the border, and the kingdom's familiar, sweet air filled my lungs. In Seifort, I felt at ease. The difference in the air between the two countries struck me as strange and unnatural. I'd thought so the first time I crossed into Galia with Myne. Now, returning, I thought it again—this border marked a boundary between two distinct worlds.

Perhaps the state of the Galian region was the result of ancient Galian technologies, like the chimera Myne and I had fought. Was this atmosphere another artifact of the past? Yet it had been four thousand years since the decimation of the Galian civilization. However, if the knights and researchers of Seifort couldn't work out why the Galians were near totally extinct, there was no way I'd be able to.

I pushed my stray thoughts aside. Reaching Babylon was more important, and I was hungry. I hurried toward the city. After walking for a while, I saw its towering walls rise in the distance. It was said that the walls surrounding Babylon played an important role in defending the city from the never-ending threat of Galian monsters. Perhaps that was why the walls rose so high into the sky, as if steel towers encircled the city.

***

When I reached Babylon, I placed my hand on the surface of one of the so-called sentinel walls that protected it. The massive walls were forged from some metal alloy I wasn't familiar with. I only knew it wasn't steel. Merely touching the wall told me the rest; this metal was strong enough to stop the charge of any monster dead in its tracks. The walls of Babylon would not easily move, but what were they made of?

"Hey, Greed," I said. "These walls seem extremely sturdy. Could your blade cut through them?"

“Huh?” Even using Telepathy, my black sword, Greed, sounded deeply offended by the doubt in my voice. “How dare you question me, Fate?! Mere adamantite will never stand in the way of the mighty Greed! Unsheathe me, and I’ll prove it!”
“Thanks, I’m good.”
Greed wasn’t satisfied with boasting, though. He went on and on about rare adamantite—an alloy that had defended ancient Galia from monsters for thousands of years. That alone set it apart from other metals. The exact method of manufacturing adamantite was now lost to time, however. Babylon’s walls were made of abandoned scrap collected from across the Galian region.
“Wow. Every now and again, you actually have something useful to say, huh?” I said.
“Pah!” Greed scoffed. “This old sentinel city and I go back a long, long way.”
“That sounds like an interesting story. But it’s not one you’re going to tell me, is it?”
“No. It’s not really all that riveting, regardless.”
To me, it sounded like Greed knew the story behind the construction of Babylon, way back when it had been built. Still, Greed was a weapon. He couldn’t move himself. That meant he must have had a wielder at the time, and he had witnessed the events leading to the birth of the city alongside them. Actually, if Greed had a past with Babylon, that meant his wielder had had some reason to stay here.
The thought filled me with curiosity. I’d wondered about Greed’s previous wielders during our travels together. Such a greedy weapon would be useless, even dangerous, to anyone who didn’t bear a Skill of Mortal Sin like my Gluttony. I knew this all too well. Greed constantly sucked away my stats, all of them, down to my paltry last three digits. No one with regular skills could ever handle a weapon possessed of such avarice. Even a holy knight would quickly find their six-figure stats running completely dry.
Did that mean Greed’s past wielder had also been a bearer of Gluttony?
“Hey, Greed,” I said. “There was another, wasn’t there? Someone who wielded you in the past.”
“Whence the sudden curiosity?”
“Come on. You can at least tell me that much, right?”
After a short silence, Greed spoke again. This question, he didn’t avoid.
“Yes. There was another.”
“What happened to them?”
“They died,” the black sword said finally. “They put me down and died. Just like them too, doing something stupid like that.”
That made sense. If that person were still alive, I never would have found the black sword in a barrel of scrap.
I listened as Greed went on. “I never thought I’d encounter such a match again. It strains belief, to think I’d see it a second time.”

“You mean my Gluttony?”
“Indeed. Anyway, enough wallowing in the past, already. Let’s head inside.”
The black sword dropped back into his customary silence. I got the sense that Greed was still reluctant to delve deep into his history with me.
I looked around, searching for the main gates of Babylon. As gates were the weak point of a walled city’s defenses, they most likely faced north, away from the Galian border. The last thing any city wanted was a large-scale monster stampede like the ones called death parades flooding in through the front door. I followed the towering walls around and, just as I expected, found the main gates facing north.
The gates of Babylon towered, as massive as the rest of the walls. They were clearly designed for huge armies to pass through quickly and easily. When I arrived, the gates hung open for the evening, and the entrance roiled with activity. Caravans trundled along carrying armed adventurers, merchants and their goods, and women in eye-catching clothing. All the transports belonged to the military, their ownership made evident by the kingdom’s seal stamped on crates and vehicles alike.
The military caravans carried supplies as well as passengers. No small number of people went looking to make it big in Galia. I saw a mixture of desperation, excitement, and hope in the eyes of the individuals bustling to and fro. Now that I aimed to make a life here, I was just another one in an opportunistic crowd. I’d be vying for every copper.
I was about to head directly through the gates when I heard a distant, rumbling din—the sound of a vast number of horses approaching, easily more than a few hundred. When I turned to look at the road stretching north, I realized why.
A grand army of the Kingdom of Seifort approached the gates of Babylon. They carried the crest of the white rose, the Hart family’s crest. The myriad merchants and adventurers cleared a path for the arriving troops, led by the new governor of Babylon.
Behind the cover of my skull mask, I narrowed my eyes, searching. *Where is she? Where is she?!*
The troops filed through the gates, soldier after soldier, but other than the crest, I detected no sign of Lady Roxy Hart. I tried to stay calm, pushing down my need to see her again. Yet desperation built in me. I gripped the hilt of the black sword hanging from my side.
Greed chided me through my Telepathy. *“No need to be so hasty. Calm down.”*
“Shut up.” Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t calm down. Lady Roxy was so close!
“Ah, I feel her presence. She’s here. Look farther down the procession.”
“Farther down…ah!”
The shock of recognition squeezed my voice into a sudden, childish squeal. It was just as Greed said, farther down the line rode an elegant girl on a white horse. She wore light armor trimmed in white, and her long blonde

hair floated on the breeze as she waved gently to the people gathered to welcome their new governor.

Lady Roxy looked even more valiant than I remembered. Even the air around her was different. She held herself with a renewed sense of confidence. She was more self-assured than when we'd been together in Seifort.

I wondered whether, like with me, something had happened to her on the way to Babylon—something that had brought out more of the holy knight within her. However, as these thoughts ran through my head, Lady Roxy seemed once again distant, far beyond my reach.
This mere glimpse of her took me completely aback.
“You’re not going to wave back to her?” Greed said with an audible grin.
“Don’t be stupid,” I muttered.
Lady Roxy rode by us. For the briefest instant, her eyes glanced in my direction. Just as quickly, her gaze returned to the road ahead. She rode on with her army. I worried that she might have spotted me, but really, she couldn’t have. The skull mask covering my face magically disguised my identity from everyone I met. So long as I wore it, nobody, not even Lady Roxy, could recognize me as Fate Graphite—as it needed to be.
If she *had* spotted me, who knew what could have happened?
As I watched, Lady Roxy passed through the main gate without looking back. This distance between us would remain. We could not be together, as we once had been in the capital of Seifort. We walked our paths apart.
The lengthy line of troops continued into Babylon long after Lady Roxy faded from view. I could tell at a glance that her army was composed of capable soldiers and adventurers. They held themselves with the pride of experience. It looked like the well-respected name of the Hart family had attracted warriors strong in skill and fighting spirit.
Night fell before the last of the army concluded their entry through the gates of Babylon. I looked up at the dimming sky and found it filled with stars. I didn’t regret the wait. It gladdened me to see Lady Roxy had weathered her journey well.
Well, now that I’d arrived in Babylon, my first task was to find a place to stay. I wasn’t sure where to start. All I knew as I entered the city was that I wanted somewhere with good food and affordable rooms.
That night, the sentinel city of Babylon became my home.

Chapter 2:
A Place to Call Home

BABYLON WAS LAID OUT in a large circle broken into three major districts. The southernmost district was the Military Sector, where Lady Roxy and her army were stationed. Besides soldiers, I'd heard that mercenaries in search of riches also made their home there.

Using Babylon as a base, adventurers hunted and killed the thousands of monsters that attempted to invade the kingdom. The adventurers who did well were highly valued by Seifort's nobility.

Of these adventurers, the most experienced were mercenaries, experts well-versed in battling the most ferocious of beasts. Most mercenaries hailed from civilian backgrounds, but some had been born to holy knight families, only they had lacked holy skills. Rumor had it that some mercenaries were once holy knights themselves, cast out from the capital due to ongoing power struggles between the great houses.

For that reason, some mercenaries openly disdained the kingdom's revered holy knights. Yet these same bitter people were hired to fight alongside the holy knights they despised; Babylon couldn't afford to consider grudges in the face of the monstrous threat. Such sentiments might even find themselves wiped away as knights and mercenaries fought side by side, and the knights had been known to expunge the criminal records of those who demonstrated significant prowess on the field. As long as a warrior did their part, their past deeds and current misbehavior could be overlooked—and they were always paid handsomely. This was the way of Babylon.

I felt Lady Roxy would be fine in the end, but her honesty and sincerity in such a den of villainy worried me. I entertained no such worries for myself, however. Survival of the fittest? Exactly what I was looking for.

My skill, Gluttony, consumed the souls of those I slew, making their skills and stats my own. My power had been forsaken by the gods themselves, but here I could run rampant. As long as my actions benefited Babylon, my trespasses would be forgiven.

I was aiming for the top. I would grow as powerful as possible, so that when the day came for me to do what was necessary, I could see my task through to the end.

Putting aside my own problems, Babylon sprawled before me. The city was at least as big as Seifort. It had to be, to house armies and mercenaries alongside wandering adventurers. Tension suffused the air, completely different from the one wrought by the struggles of the common folk back in Seifort. This tension stemmed from the city's position on the front line—a place where wild things gathered. It reminded me of how Galia smelled of blood.

After passing through the main gate, I walked down a large street, the Common Sector spreading out to either side of me. The Common Sector was where adventurers and merchants gathered while they looked to make it big, and it was broadly divided into two further districts. To the east lay the Merchant Sector, and to the west, the Residential Sector, where I would find inns and lodgings. Straight ahead of me lay the Military Sector.

You could summarize Babylon's districts thus:

The Military Sector in the south, where holy knights dispatched from the kingdom and other military personnel were stationed. It was also home to hired mercenaries.

The Merchant Sector to the east, which brimmed with weapon and armor shops, as well as bars and taverns. The sheer number of shops was said to rival even the wealthy capital of Seifort.

And the Residential Sector to the west, which largely consisted of lodgings —many luxurious, due to the high earnings of adventurers in Babylon.

Not just anyone could enter the Military Sector. Even walking the boisterous streets of the Common Sector, I saw guards posted at every gate, their eyes glaring from intimidating faces. I had to assume Lady Roxy had passed through those very gates and was now somewhere inside.

I turned to the Residential Sector. I needed a place to stay. Everywhere I looked, the inns were lavish and luxurious. I decided to try my luck and picked an inn at random. As soon as I walked inside the huge building, a sharp-dressed man in black approached me. He was immaculately clean, and he smiled as I entered. A staff member, no doubt.

"Welcome, sir," the man said. "Will you be staying this evening?"

"Yeah."

The man took in the sharp details of my skull mask, but his smile did not falter.

"This mask doesn't faze you, does it?" I asked.

"I assume it conceals your identity, yes? It's nothing out of the ordinary here; many travelers look to disguise who they might once have been."

That was about what I'd expected. He likely referred to those rumored former holy knights, or others banished from the kingdom for troublemaking. With those types milling around everywhere, this inn would have to be totally disconnected from the rest of the city if the likes of me still shocked them.

"How much per night?" I asked.

"Including a bath and board, one night comes to five gold coins."

"What?!" My jaw almost disconnected on its way to the floor. *Five gold?! Highway robbery!* No comparable place in Seifort charged more than a single gold coin.

The man acknowledged my shock but remained unfazed. "Am I correct to assume you are an adventurer on your first visit to Babylon?" he asked. "Your shock is not uncommon among new arrivals. If you head farther west,

you'll find a host of comparatively cheaper lodgings. Perhaps you'd prefer to try your luck there?"
I picked my jaw back up from the floor. "Thanks for the advice. But why even tell me about your competition?"
"It's simple, really," the man said. "Many can't afford the comforts of our lodgings on their first night. But after they earn coin hunting the monsters of Galia, many of those same people return. Think of it as a show of kindness with an ulterior motive. In any case, I look forward to seeing you again in the future."
"I see."
This man was quite the salesperson. He didn't brush people off because they didn't have the money; he enticed them into a potential future sale. Very smart. It seemed the people of Babylon approached things differently from what I was familiar with.
"Thank you for the information," I said. "Until next time."
"We humbly await your return." The man bowed deeply as I left.
I continued west. As I proceeded deeper into the district, the city changed before my eyes. The magnificent red-brick lodgings faded into dilapidated, older white-brick buildings, dirtied and darkened with time. These inns didn't have the money to invest in renovations, which required deliveries from outside Galia and were therefore expensive. All in all, the farther west you traveled, the lower the prestige of the lodging.
Currently, I only had four gold and thirty silver to my name. Once upon a time, I'd had more than forty gold coins, but I'd lost most of them traveling with Myne. It felt like my savings were practically vanishing from my coin purse. I'd spent them all way too carelessly. From now on, I'd have to be more cautious.
Eventually I found myself standing before a collection of inns cobbled together from fractured bricks. *Where do I even start? These all look the same…*
A woman's voice roused me from my thoughts. "You there, young man! You seem like you're looking for a place to stay, aren't you?"
A lively woman, about middle-aged, walked toward me with a hearty, full-throated laugh.
"I am," I said.
"I thought as much. Stay at my inn. I'll make it cheap. Well, how about it?"
"How much is cheap?"
"Fifty silver a night!"
Hm…
When I considered that the prices in Babylon were about five times what I was accustomed to, that didn't seem like a bad deal. Now that I didn't have to worry about Myne eating all my money, I could fill my coin purse back up as soon as I started hunting again. Plus, I liked this landlady's frank, straightforward attitude.
"Okay, you've got yourself a deal," I said.

“You haven’t even seen the inn yet!” The woman laughed. “You sure?”
However, I’d seen the food the woman carried—I’d scanned her basket with my Identify skill, and I knew it was all fresh. That made me sure of my decision. Anyone with an eye for ingredients knew their way around preparing them.
“I am,” I said. “But I’d appreciate it if you could get me a meal as soon as possible.”
“You got it!” the landlady replied cheerfully. “Follow me.”
I kept up with her easily. “Let me carry some of that for you.”
“Oh, really? Thanks! But don’t expect any discounts!”
“That’s okay. All I really want is to get some food in me soon.”
The woman laughed again. “In that case, I’ll cook up the best feast I can!”
I really couldn’t wait. My stomach felt no different. It was right there with me, on the verge of grumbling with familiar hunger.
Then it really did growl in impatience.
“Wow, you aren’t kidding, are you? Want to eat this bread on the way?” The landlady offered me a loaf.
“Are you sure?”
She nodded. “I’ll add it to your tab. You’ll pay for it later.”
She was pretty shrewd, but I didn’t have a reason to refuse. I took the bread. It was warm and freshly baked. With the first bite, my mouth filled with the sweet, delicious taste of rye. The flavor quietly washed away my exhaustion.
“This is delicious,” I said around my mouthful of rye bread. “I’ve never had anything like it.”
“I’m glad you like it. My little sister makes it. Stay at my inn, and you can eat your fill of that and much more!”
“I have to say, I’m intrigued.”
“Us small-timers can’t wow you with the fancy facades of those bougie joints. We have to make the service really count. Ah, here we are. Welcome to my inn!”
The exterior was about what I expected, just an old sign hanging in front of a building of cracking, fractured bricks. The ancient structure had crumbled over many long years, and I couldn’t say it looked appealing, even if I wanted to.
Still, it only looked like that from the outside. I walked in, excited. If a single piece of bread had brought me such delight, what other joys did I have to look forward to?

Chapter 3:
Where Wild Things Gather

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I woke with a yawn to the chirping of birds. The landlady had prepared me a welcome dinner, and I'd had more to drink than I expected. Those drinks went on my tab, of course, meaning my wallet was in serious trouble. I'd have to start monster hunting right away if I wanted to spend another night at this inn.

Over dinner, the landlady had told me about her past. Her husband had died and left her to raise three kids alone. Her eldest son, now an adult, worked as a mercenary here in Babylon, while her two daughters were fourteen and eight and growing up quickly. Her daughters ate together with us as the landlady talked. However, they were shy and quiet. They didn't speak to me, and they barely replied when I tried talking to them. It was almost like they weren't there at all.

I yawned again, got out of bed, and started getting dressed. Then came a knock at the door. It was meek, so it couldn't be the landlady. *Probably one of her daughters.* I put my skull mask on and gave the okay. The door opened gently.

"Good morning, Mr. Fate." It was the landlady's eldest daughter.

"Morning," I said.

"Breakfast is ready. Please head to the dining room."

"Okay, got it. Thanks."

The girl couldn't shut the door fast enough. Her face had gone red, too. I wondered what had happened—and then I realized. I was still in the middle of changing. Being half-asleep when she'd knocked, I hadn't even put my shirt on. It was so careless of me to do that to a fourteen-year-old. I had to find her and apologize.

The truth of the matter was that my clothes were in bad shape. They'd been with me all the way from Seifort and suffered countless battles, so I shouldn't have been surprised that I'd worn them out. However, the real damage had come from the fight against the chimera. That beast's blue fireballs had done a number on my armor. I sighed and picked up the black sword Greed from his resting place against the wall.

"No saving these," I said. "I'm going to have to buy some new threads."

Greed responded with an arrogant laugh. "You're an embarrassment to the blade you wield," he said. "Now get out there and make us some money! And while you're at it, buy me a new scabbard."

"The scabbard's all you care about, huh?"

"Obviously!"

Greed responded in his usual flippant manner, but he did have a point. His scabbard had taken a beating, and it was just as shabby as the rest of my

gear. I could still use it, but it seemed about time for an upgrade. New equipment would mark the start of our new adventure.
However, to buy that equipment, I needed money. I made mental calculations through my light hangover—the lodging fees, the new armor, the new scabbard—and realized I needed to start hunting no later than today.
“First things first, though,” I said. “Let’s get some food.”
Greed grunted approval. I attached the sword to my belt and exited my room. Out in the corridor, the landlady’s youngest daughter stared at me with suspicion in her eyes.
“You…” she said, “you…you talk to your sword…”
She backed away from me step by step.
Great. I bet I looked like a crazy, talks-to-his-weapons weirdo. I have to fix this misunderstanding!
As I approached the girl, intending to explain, she backed away again. As I moved, so did she, always maintaining the same distance between us. Abruptly, she burst into tears.
“Mama!” she cried.
The girl bolted down the hall in search of the landlady’s protection. I had really hoped I could stay here for a while, but if I ruined my relationships with the family bright and early on my second day, I had no hope.
Greed burst into a high-pitched cackle. “Did you see that? They hate you, Fate!”
“And whose fault do you think that is?!”
“I can tell you for certain, not mine.”
“What?! It was *all* your fault!”
Wait, Fate. Wait, I thought. Any more of this talking to your sword, and you’ll only attract more suspicion!
I glanced down the corridor and, to my chagrin, found the landlady’s older daughter staring at me. I saw in her eyes that she’d developed entirely the wrong idea. She was convinced I was dangerous. Untrustworthy. First, I’d bared my naked chest to her, and now I was muttering at my sword again! At the very least, I had to say something to try and salvage my reputation with this family.
“It’s not what it looks like,” I said quickly. “This sword, it, uh, has a soul…”
“I’ve never heard of a sword with a soul before,” the older daughter said.
It seemed that, like her mother, she had a way of cutting right to the point. No ordinary person would believe Greed’s existence possible, or that I regularly used Telepathy to converse with him, no matter what I said. So long as I stayed at this inn, I had to accept that I would be “that creep who mutters at his weapon.”
Still, I wanted to clear up at least one of these misunderstandings while I still had the chance. “Anyway, I’m sorry about before,” I said.
“What do you mean?”
“Next time I answer the door, I promise I’ll be fully clothed.”

“Oh. I…that, uh…I, um…” The girl suddenly stumbled over her words.
I tilted my head in confusion just as the landlady arrived. “What’s going on here? All the other lodgers have already eaten, you know.”
She’d come to find me when I didn’t show up. I explained the situation, apologizing for putting her daughter in such an awkward position.
To my surprise, the landlady flashed a smug look at the girl. “Well, well. You never *usually* open a customer’s door for such a reason. What’s all this about?”
“Mama…I…that…”
The girl was again at a loss for words. She dashed off, red-faced, for the dining room. I scratched my jaw in confusion. I hoped everything was okay.
“Sorry about that,” said the landlady.
“Huh?”
“Goodness. I guess she’s really that age already, huh? They grow up so fast!” The landlady nodded and chuckled to herself as she pushed me toward the dining room. Then she leaned in and whispered in my ear. “By the way, she helped you back to your room last night. You know, when you were so drunk that you couldn’t walk straight? Anyway, when she did, she saw what you look like under that mask of yours.”
“What?!”
You must be joking… I haven’t even been here for a whole day, and already somebody’s seen my real face?! Ugh.
More than anything, I wanted to punch me from yesterday.
“Don’t worry, you’ll be just fine,” the landlady said. “As long as you’re a good customer, your secret is safe with us!”
“Uh, thanks…” I mumbled.
In other words, if I wanted to keep my secret safe, I wouldn’t be staying at any other inn. It really made me think; you don’t drink alcohol—*alcohol* drinks *you*. Then you lose control of yourself. Nothing good comes of the result.
The landlady grinned as I stood there, my shoulders slumped. “What’s done is done,” she said. “No use regretting the past! In any case, it’s time for breakfast!”
“Well, yeah, I guess you’re right. Let’s eat.”
“Then let’s get going already!”
“You don’t need to push me!”
“Come on! A little shove never hurt anybody!”
Even though the landlady was a bit pushy, there was something I liked about this inn. It had a warmth to it. I felt sure this was similar to the feeling I’d had with the family I’d nearly forgotten.

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The landlady’s older daughter piled my plate high, and I ate until I was completely stuffed. Then I left the Residential Sector for the Merchant

Sector to do a little pre-purchase scouting. I wanted to buy a lot of equipment, but I had to hold back until I had more funds.
The Merchant Sector was designed similarly to the Residential Sector. The prime real estate facing Babylon's main street belonged to a collection of huge, grand shops lined up one after another, but as you went deeper, the grade of the shops dropped.
I had a feeling that in my present rags, I wouldn't make it a step into any of the big shops before they threw me right back out. So back I went until I found a tailor's shop, only to learn even simple tailored clothes were at least a gold coin apiece.
"Whoa! This is all so expensive." The surprise slipped out of my throat before I could catch it.
"You lousy cheapskate!" said Greed, clearly annoyed with my naivety.
"Shut up," I mumbled.
I could read the impatience in his tone: Quit the aimless wandering and go hunt some monsters! Earn us some real money!
I intended to do exactly that after I made my first purchases. Maybe I'd start with orcs.
As I wandered farther into the sector, I noticed a crowd and found myself drawn toward them. I expected to find them gathered around a stall or a shop selling rare merchandise, but instead, it turned out to be a saloon.
The saloon was by no means pretty or clean. The dirty red brick certainly told the story of the building's history, but it was a stretch to say it had a rustic charm. From the outside, it looked about ready to go out of business. I couldn't believe the dive had attracted such a crowd, especially this early in the morning.
Were people in this part of the city really bored or something? Did they all start drinking before lunch? That didn't seem right. Everyone in Babylon dreamed of making it big. At this hour, adventurers were preparing for the hunt. Merchants were opening their shops.
Hm… So what makes a run-down place like this so appealing, then?
As I watched, the saloon's doors opened and a young woman emerged. When she stepped out, exuberant voices shouted to her, excited, one after another.
She was beautiful. Certainly pretty enough to draw anyone's gaze. Her face had just a hint of naivety. Her hair was a lustrous, shimmering blue, like flowing water. In fact, I couldn't seem to take my eyes off her. Even putting my ordinary feelings aside, something compelled me to stare. It was a compulsion well outside of the ordinary.
Instinctively, I stepped away from the crowd. Apprehension rang in my head like an alarm. Unless that was the hangover. *Don't get closer.*
"Ah, looks like you finally get it," said Greed.
"Wait, do you mean—could she be…"
"I mean exactly that," he replied. "You and she are two of a kind. You both bear Skills of Mortal Sin."

I gulped, my mouth suddenly dry, and looked back over at the young woman with hair the color of a mountain stream. *We're the same?*
The woman turned to me as if just noticing my gaze. In truth, I felt she'd been aware of me even before I noticed her.
She seemed to appraise me as she stepped out from her crowd of admirers. She smiled, and she spoke with a lovely charm that seemed to twine fingers around my soul.
"You, there. I've been waiting for you. I'm Eris. I've had my eye on you since Seifort. I knew you'd make your way to Babylon eventually, so I arrived a little early and just waited for you to catch up."
The woman beckoned me to enter the saloon.
Would I follow?
I supposed I might as well test my luck. Ever since meeting Myne, it had become clear to me that, regardless of our wishes, we who bore the Skills of Mortal Sin were drawn to each other.

Chapter 4:
The Guardian of Lust

THE SALOON WAS JUST SHY of opening its doors for business, and there wasn't a customer in sight—only me and Eris. She took a seat at one of about twenty chairs surrounding a large, round table. She turned her sweet purple eyes to me with a smile.

"Are you…the owner of the place?" I asked.

"Oh, no. I just work here part-time in return for board. The owner is away purchasing supplies. By the way, he says he's forty and still hasn't been lucky in love, poor thing. He's all in on looking for a wife, however."

"I don't need the details. Why were you waiting for me?"

I didn't care about this absent barkeep's life story. I'd come to get an answer to my question. I needed to know how she'd come to bear her Skill of Mortal Sin. However, Eris only tucked her long blue hair behind her ear and stood.

"There's no need to rush," she said, walking over to the bar. "We've only just met. Let's toast to the occasion."

She took two glasses from the shelf and filled them with wine. Judging by the label on the bottle, this wasn't the cheap swill I was used to, but an extravagant, top-shelf vintage. Eris returned to the table with the two glasses in hand.

"Here," she said. "I saved the bottle for this very day. Saved it a long time, just for you. I hope you'll forgive me if the wine's too old for your taste."

"Thanks…"

"Take off your mask and drink."

I did so; if she already knew about me, there wasn't much point in pretending to be the adventurer Corpse.

There was something heavy and tragic in the expression on Eris's face as she gazed at me, as if the wine were full of old memories. However, here she was, serving it to me on the day of our first meeting. What did this gesture mean? Confusion smothered me. Again, there was too much I just didn't know.

Still, I drank the offered glass in two gulps. The wine was indeed old; there was a sour tinge to the flavor that once, a long time ago, must have been exquisite.

Eris watched me, satisfied. "A man who can hold his drink. Very impressive. Would you like some more?"

I shook my head. I wasn't here to indulge.

"Impatient, aren't you?" said Eris. "Well, no matter. I wanted to make contact with you in Seifort just after your Gluttony awakened, but a good opportunity never showed itself. And then, while I was waiting for my chance, you rushed off after Roxy Hart and left the kingdom behind."

“So, you watched me back at the capital, too?”
“Of course! Oh, something I forgot to mention—I’m the bearer of Lust, a Skill of Mortal Sin. I’m also a guardian of the Kingdom of Seifort. I know all about you, Fate. I know all about your blade Greed too. I considered taking him from the flea market into my custody, but I knew that eventually he’d find his way to you. So I simply let things unfold.”
I heard Greed grumbling disapproval through my Telepathy. He didn’t like hearing that Eris had played him like a hapless pawn.
“You and Greed are acquaintances, then?” I asked.
“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that, no. I’m second generation. I haven’t acquainted myself with many of the first. Speaking of, that girl you came to Babylon with, the Wrathful one. She’s first generation. We don’t really get along.” Eris smiled, leaning forward. “It seems she’s not fond of the difference between our bust sizes.”
That didn’t seem right. I suspected Eris’s personality was the issue. Myne hated people who were overly friendly, pushy, or too forward. However, the subject that most piqued my curiosity was this talk of first and second generations.
Eris approached me as I puzzled over what she meant, stepping so close that her chest almost touched me. With that small gesture, without even the slightest effort, she disrupted my thoughts, dizzying them with sensual impressions and feelings. They didn’t feel like *my* thoughts, though. It was as if her proximity acted as a kind of charm in itself. I clenched my jaw and fought to concentrate.
“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Eris. “That feeling’s an effect of Lust. The power to charm simply seeps out of me. I can’t always control it. Men and women, old and young—it doesn’t matter. When my charm gets you, you can’t help but love me. It’s similar to the way your Gluttony leaves you eternally hungry.”
Eris smiled. She didn’t seem particularly bothered by the effect she had on me. Gluttony, for all its strengths, threatened to consume my very sense of self unless I kept it fed with the souls of my enemies. Yet Eris stood here and spoke so casually about her Lust. Her skill didn’t seem to carry the same risk as mine. Or so she wished to have me think.
I glowered as she stood there, vibrant and beaming. I didn’t like feeling manipulated, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that she wasn’t being entirely honest with me.
“Now, now, there’s no need to look like that. This isn’t particularly easy for me, either. Ah, where were we? Oh, yes, speaking of Myne, that reminds me. The two of you defeated the chimera Haniel yesterday, right? Thank you. Of the seven chimera varieties, Haniel’s one of the most annoying. You did me a real favor.”
“Seven types of chimera?” I repeated. One had been bad enough.
“Yes. They’re biological weapons, mechangels originally built to protect ancient Galia. There are seven types in total. Haniel was a barrier chimera. They’re not easy to get close to once they reach their evolved state. Not

even a holy knight would be able to take care of one very easily, not these days. They just aren't strong enough."
"I don't really want to know," I said cautiously, still trying to catch up with her barrage of information, "but are you saying there are at least six other chimeras still alive in Galia? Each with their own name and set of abilities?"
That would mean six more people had been fused into those immortal monsters as well. I wanted to believe I was just hearing things, but Eris chuckled wryly and poured more wine into my empty glass with a little nod.
"Yes. Nothing for you to get too excited about, though. Most of the chimeras remain quietly shut down in the Galian capital. What's intriguing about Haniel is the simple fact that, well, someone had to move it out of the capital, you know?"
Myne and I had found Haniel's cocoon in an old graveyard at the center of a long-abandoned village. I'd thought that cemetery was the chimera's resting place, but now Eris claimed somebody had intentionally placed it there. This admittedly intrigued me. Still, I didn't want to get too distracted by someone else's problems. I couldn't lose sight of why I was in Babylon—for Lady Roxy. I took the glass and poured the wine down my parched throat.
"In any case," said Eris, "let's leave *that* story where it is for now, shall we? I don't really want to stick my neck into the affairs of the first generation, so let's get to the heart of the matter."
"What do you mean by that?"
I'd thought this whole conversation was going to be about the chimeras. What problem could Eris possibly have that exceeded the threat of an enemy as terrifying as Haniel?
"It's about Roxy, now that she's here in the Galian region," Eris said. My spine stiffened at the mention of Lady Roxy's name, but Eris continued casually. "You see, Roxy Hart must die."
"What?!" I snarled with a sudden rush of anger. The glass in my hand shattered, the last few red drops spattering against the floor.
Eris went on, cool and composed even under my enraged glare. "This is a matter of great importance. Not just for the kingdom, but for its very future. Roxy's death is sure to lead in a *most* prosperous direction."
"That's ridiculous! What are you talking about?! What does her death have to do with the kingdom's 'direction'?! She's the only holy knight with the people's best interests at heart! She's why—that's why I…"
I grabbed hold of Eris's sleeve. Even then, she didn't show a hint of anger, instead going on calmly as though she had not just proposed the importance of an assassination.
"The phenomenon of monstrous 'hate,'" Eris continued. "You know of it, yes?"
"Of course I do. We rouse monstrous aggression with our own. It dissipates on a daily basis. What does that have to do with Lady Roxy?!"
"Mm…half your statement's correct, but the other half isn't. Hate doesn't completely dissipate; it accumulates over many long years. During that

time, very particular monsters with unique names are born of it. You know these monsters as crowned beasts. That kobold you fought at the Hart Estate? A prime example."
This was true. Hadn't Greed confirmed the origin of that monster himself? The crowned kobold had been a result of hate built up over generations of the Hart family defending themselves from waves of invading kobolds. It haunted me somewhat to realize Eris knew I'd killed the beast. She had followed me much more closely than I imagined. Was she watching me at all times? And if so, how? I hadn't noticed at all. Hers was a power I could not yet fathom.
I released my hold on Eris's sleeve. Her expression did not falter.
"I'm glad you've decided to calm down a little," she said. "That expression isn't as cute on you. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. The phenomenon of hate is also present in humans. For example, hate grows from the oppressed, who suffer poverty, discrimination, and tyranny under the rule of the holy knights. To that boiling brew, imagine adding the death of Roxy Hart, the last descendant of the only holy knight family the public truly adores. Say her death came in a particularly gruesome fashion—for example, at the hands of those other, despised, underhanded holy knights. Well, then the hate of the oppressed would find a pure direction in which to flow."
"What are you saying?" My mind reeled.
"Think of Roxy's death as a catalyst. The explosion of hate from her demise would result in the birth of humans with an extraordinary new power, one created directly from all who hate. These humans would be special. Their skills would surpass those of the holy knights, and so they would grow up to become the new bastion of the kingdom. Marvelous, don't you think?"
I could barely speak through my gritted teeth. "I'd hardly call Lady Roxy dying *marvelous*!"
I couldn't even begin to believe the scope of Eris's plan, her cruelty. The very idea of using Lady Roxy to artificially force the creation of such power, as though humans were monsters to manipulate—it was like human lives, especially Lady Roxy's, meant nothing at all to her.
Still, Eris was unmoved.
"I suppose, in a way, you're right," she said. "If you only look at the immediate results, losing Roxy Hart is indeed a slight setback. But try to take a longer point of view, Fate. Everything changes when you look five hundred or five thousand years into the future. Consider our situation as bearers of Skills of Mortal Sin. I realize your power only just awakened, and I'm sorry if my words seem harsh. I just want to avoid you losing yourself to your youthful emotions and fighting the Divine Dragon."
Abruptly, I stood from my chair. I was no longer interested in whatever else Eris had to say. As I put my hand on the door of the saloon to leave, I heard her call out behind me.
"I've said my piece, Fate. I only wanted you to know what's been set in motion. Now, the rest is up to you. I promise you this: I will not get in your

way. I don’t intend to be any more than a bystander. So don’t hold your new knowledge against me, all right? I hope you’ll visit the saloon again, as a customer. I assure you, you’ll get more than your money’s worth.”
Despite the callous disregard for Lady Roxy’s life with which Eris had just spoken, my heart twinged to hear the loneliness lingering in her voice. I suspected then that, like Myne, Eris’s life was tethered to a force I neither knew nor understood.
Perhaps I was the only one of us who could be called truly free.

Chapter 5:
The Return of Corpse the Adventurer

I LEFT THE SALOON, slipped my skull mask back on, and took a deep breath. The crowd of customers waiting for the saloon to open had grown as Eris and I talked. As long as she worked there, the run-down saloon would always be a hit. People had no choice but to be attracted to her.

At least I'd learned Lust was a skill that had the power to attract people, though I suspected that wasn't all Eris's skill was capable of. At first blush, Gluttony only seemed to make me unendingly hungry, but the dark truth of the skill—the reason it was a Mortal Sin—was the power it granted me through devouring souls. Lust had to be similar. Regardless of how Eris hid it, there was another, more sinister, side to its power.

Another mystery was that Eris didn't seem to carry a Weapon of Mortal Sin, or at least, not one I'd seen. Though I couldn't say for certain, it seemed likely that she also wielded one, just as Myne and I did.

"Hey, Greed," I said.

"What?"

"Which Weapon of Mortal Sin does Eris wield?"

"Beats me. She wasn't lying when she said we hardly know each other. She wasn't carrying a weapon the last time I saw her, either."

"Is it possible that she doesn't have one?"

Greed laughed. *"No."*

If Greed didn't know Eris's weapon, I didn't have any other way to find out. However, as long as Eris held to her promise to remain an impartial observer, she wasn't a direct threat to either Lady Roxy or me. I didn't need to know what powers she was hiding. Not yet.

I still had plenty of time before lunch, so I decided to finally get cracking on monster hunting. The process was no different here than it was in Seifort. First you felled monsters, then you gave proof of their defeat at the designated trading post. The proof for orcs was the same as for goblins—a set of ears. For gargoyles, it was horns. The trading post clearly defined the necessary parts to trade for bounties, so if you proffered any other random bits, you'd leave empty-handed. I'd looked up the details a day earlier, and a list was posted at the inn.

The safest bet was to start with Galia's most common monster, the orc. I'd fought orcs before, so I knew their tactics and could handle them on my own. A single squadron consisted of about two hundred orcs. That was a lot of ears and would make for a tidy sum, with which I could finally buy new clothes.

With my mind made up, I finished exploring the Merchant Sector. As my last stop, I bought two sizable burlap sacks and headed for Babylon's gates.

"Time to put in a hard day's work."

“You said it,” said Greed. “Get cracking on making money so that you can buy me a high-quality, custom-forged scabbard already!”
“Don’t get any extravagant ideas, Greed.”
“What are you nattering on about? Do you not respect my struggles? My hardships? Everything I do for you?”
“Like what?” I asked, pushing down a laugh.
“Who operates the auto-targeting system for your black bow? And who is the sole reason you can load and fire those elemental-magic-charged arrows everyone’s so impressed by?”
Admittedly, those *were* very helpful feats. I couldn’t fault the sword there. He may have had a penchant for running his metaphorical mouth, but he always did his job.
“Guess I don’t have a choice then, do I? We’ll get you that scabbard. But in return, I expect your full support, Greed!”
Greed laughed. “Expect nothing less of the mighty black sword Greed!”
I couldn’t describe him as anything but confident. Arrogant, even. Still, it was possible I had something to learn from his cocky attitude. Here in Babylon, I lived the life of an adventurer. I didn’t need to get bombastic or pompous, but I did need to project a certain level of confidence. Hunting solo had a way of drawing attention, and not necessarily the good kind. Groups who took umbrage with my loner tendencies were sure to sprout in my wake like weeds. If I kept acting timid, they’d target me, dragging me into an endless string of unnecessary quarrels.
There was no better time to practice than now. As I headed for Babylon’s main gate, I straightened my back and tried to project an aura of confidence.
The main street bustled with people coming and going that morning, just as it had the night before. Clusters of adventurers set off on new hunts, and merchant caravans delivered supplies. At first, I was surprised to see so many distinct groups of adventurers loitering around the main gate, but I quickly realized I was looking at the same practice I had grown familiar with in Seifort. Adventurers gathered here to find members for their hunting parties. None of that mattered to me, so I continued.
However, as I passed the groups milling about the walls, a voice called out to me. I turned to see a man in his thirties, decked out in sturdy armor.
“You there, in the skull mask!” he said. “You look like you know your way around a sword. Won’t you join us? Our usual front-liner is injured, and we’re in a bit of a bind.”
“Sorry, but I hunt alone. I don’t do parties.”
The man’s eyes bugged from their sockets, and he quickly stepped back to put some distance between us. I thought he’d treat me like an idiot, the way adventurers treated me in Seifort and Lanchester, but no. This man was terrified.
“My humble apologies, sir. If you hunt solo, does that mean you’re a, er, former holy knight?”

Ah, I get it, I thought. This adventurer assumed I was one of the banished. Then again, killing the holy knight Hado Vlerick *had* given me the Holy Sword Technique skill, so in a way, I was indeed a holy knight.
I didn't see any problem with playing along.
"Yeah," I said. "Something like that."
The man yelped. "I'm so sorry, sir. I mean, it's just—with the way you're dressed—I thought that, uh… Please excuse my ignorance!"
Again, the man wasn't completely wrong. In my burnt light armor, I really didn't look like much of a knight. What's more, the holy knights were a proud lot. Even if they were divested of their position somehow, I expected that they insisted on showy, high-quality equipment, not the black light armor I chose for my nighttime fighting.
I took another look at the adventurers gathered by the gate. Three former holy knights stood among them. An intimidating air emanated from them, separating them from the other adventurers, and unique ambition filled their piercing eyes.
"Those knights are probably trying to raise their status while the Seifort army is in disarray thanks to the Divine Dragon," said Greed. "Your former master just arrived yesterday, and it will be a while before her forces fully mobilize."
"So, before Lady Roxy arrived, these ex-knights protected the city?"
"Quite. Now that the army is here, they'll look for another path to fame and fortune by helping out with the monster hunting."
Babylon really was a nexus where people from different walks of life met and intertwined. I'd met all sorts thus far, and they all interested me to a degree. Of course, my foremost concern remained Lady Roxy's situation, but I was also curious about Myne's investigation into the depths of Galia.
I carried this swirl of half-formed concerns in my heart as I ventured out through the gates of Babylon for the first time.
I adjusted the burlap sacks slung over my shoulder and headed directly south, to the border between Galia and the kingdom's territory. In my current field of vision, the horizon was clear. It seemed no monsters had crossed the border since I'd returned.
So, I crossed into Galia to look for them myself.
"The stench of blood reeks here. I just can't get used to it," I muttered.
"You will, in time," said Greed ominously.
The air of the Galian region had a unique slaughterhouse acridity. It seemed to kill the taste of any food I ate. I took a piece of jerky from my bag and chewed off a chunk to test that theory. The old meat stunk like I was chewing on a raw carcass. The act soon made me queasy. I stowed the rest of the jerky in my bag. I'd eat later.
"Sure would like to be back in Babylon before lunch," I said.
"That's up to you," said Greed.
He hit the nail on the head, blunt as always. My success depended on how quickly I moved. When I'd traveled through Galia with Myne, we'd

encountered several orc hordes one after another, and we hadn't even been hunting them. With that sort of luck, I suspected I wouldn't have to search too long to find another. Right on schedule, a squadron came into view.
"Orcs really do pop up everywhere around here," I said.
"Well, they have a lot of vitality, they breed like rabbits, and they mature quickly. They'll even attack humans to breed. There's usually something like twenty newborn orcs in a litter, and they eat through their mother's stomach to get free. When the mother's a human, the orc fetuses mature more rapidly as well."
Greed's words made me queasier than the jerky. "I didn't need to know all that."
"Hrmph. And after all the trouble I go through to educate you."
I'd known human meat was especially delicious to monsters, but I had *not* known some species could use humans for procreation. Truthfully, I'd been happier in my ignorance. On top of that horrifying information, it was gruesome to imagine the very orcs I slew daily born in a bloodbath, chewing their own mother open from the inside. The knowledge slowed my movements as the orc squadron approached, readying for battle.
Had they seen me? I followed their line of sight.
"Oh. Well, that's unfortunate," I said.
A wandering party of adventurers had discovered the same squadron. I had been distracted by the awful facts Greed shared and the other party had beaten me to the chase.
"What are you doing, Fate?! You fool!"
"Oh, shut up."
It was an unspoken rule of monster hunting that whoever started a battle had dibs, so to speak. It was bad manners to steal someone else's hunt after the battle started. That wasn't a completely unbreakable law, but if you violated it too often, you'd quickly make a name for yourself as an untrustworthy outcast. Being a solo hunter, I didn't necessarily mind that sort of reputation, but I wanted to avoid people talking about me behind my back where I could.
Greed, on the other hand, encouraged that sort of misbehavior. "Fate, take their hunt. Take it! Take it for the sake of my high-quality, custom-forged scabbard!"
"Don't be ridiculous."
The hunting party fighting the orcs had the upper hand. It looked like it would be just a matter of time before they won the battle. I could stand around and watch, but that would get me nowhere.
Guess I'll look for another squadron, I thought.
Then I noticed my new quarry. Two orc squadrons, approaching from the west—a huge group, comprised of at least four hundred orcs. Based on their direction, they were on a collision course with the very hunting party I was watching. This was a recipe for serious damage, and not in the adventurers' favor.

“Looks like there’s room for us after all,” I said.
“Indeed!”
I unsheathed the black sword from his scabbard and charged the horde of approaching orcs.

Chapter 6:
A Fortress of a Shield

TWO SQUADRONS OF ORCS. With that many ears, I could sort my money issues in a single hunt. The only potential problem was figuring out how to take down all of them. If I used the phenomenon of hate to pull their attention, though, I could take out all four hundred orcs in one clean sweep.
To start, I barged directly through the center of the four-hundred-strong squadron.
"Greed, you good to go?"
"Hmph. You know me—I'm always ready!"
I charged recklessly right at the orcs. The high orc leaders barked orders, and in the next instant, the sky filled with a seething swarm of arrows and fireballs, all aimed right at me.
"Fate, incoming."
"Got it."
Now for what I'd been looking forward to since arriving in Babylon. It was time to experiment.
I thrust the black sword forward and called forth its new power, the Third Level. The blade transformed in my hands from the familiar one-handed sword into a black tower shield taller than I was. Just as the shield finished its transformation and I braced for impact, the torrent of arrows and fireballs rained down on us.
The shudder of hundreds of impacts ran through my right arm. The barrage continued without pause, an ongoing assault that was a far cry from the power of the goblins I'd first faced. Regardless, none of the attacks punctured my enormous shield. Greed's Third Form absorbed or deflected every last one of their missiles.
Now this will definitely come in handy, I thought.
Greed chuckled triumphantly. "Behold the power of the Third Level! Watch as it defies all attacks—physical and magical. This shield is practically a fortress! Fear not, Fate! I give you permission to praise my might! Worship my greatness!"
Honestly, it was hard to concentrate on the battle with Greed's boasting echoing in my head. "Would you keep it down? I'm sort of in the middle of something here!"
We hadn't even reached the two squadrons, and already Greed had decided that we'd won. Who was he to be so arrogant? *I* was the one doing the actual fighting, and it was *my* life on the line.
"Keep riding your high horse while I'm trying to fight, and you can kiss that brand-new custom-forged scabbard goodbye!"
"Hey, hey, wait a second. No need to be hasty. It's not like you to be so cold-hearted, Fate. Besides, it wouldn't look right if you were dressed in

handsome new clothes while your trusty scabbard hung in tatters. Usually it's the opposite way around! You keep your tattered rags, and the mighty Greed sports a beautiful new sheath!"
"According to who?! No one does that! Why would I even consider it?!"
Greed definitely had his own special line of logic. According to him, the wielder of a sword owed everything to their weapon. I wouldn't admit it, not with his already inflated ego, but in my case, he wasn't wrong. Still, he could have a bit of decorum!
The orcs' assault rained down upon the black shield. Greed and I bickered as we continued to dash forward. We were almost at the front line of the horde. My plan was to dive into their midst, unleashing the form of the adamantite-cleaving black sword just as we hit their ranks.
Just before I leaped, Greed interrupted me. "Wait, Fate. Trust me. Barge straight through!"
"Huh? Really?!"
His idea seemed liable to get me killed. Was Greed trying to off me just because I'd threatened to deny him that scabbard?
Greed exploded into an arrogant laugh. "Let me demonstrate the true reason for the shield's impressive size. Don't stop for anything! Run those orcs down like beasts!"
"Okay, but don't blame me for what happens next!"
Yet again, Greed confidently urged me into danger. Where did that reasoning even come from? Then again, whenever he encouraged me like this, it went surprisingly well.
Fine then! Instead of transforming him into the black sword, I plowed head-on into the squadron of orcs.
My arm met incredible weight, followed by shrieks and blows pounding against the shield. The orcs snarled and grunted as my momentum threw them into the sky. As I charged onward, a familiar metallic voice rang in my ears, informing me that my stats were steadily increasing.
"This is…this is amazing!"
"It is! It is!" Greed laughed. "This move is called the Shield Bash. It requires a certain amount of strength, but with your current stats? No issue. It sends puny monsters like orcs flying to their ugly dooms. Now run, Fate! Go! Faster!"
"All right! Let's do it!"
The shield was extraordinary. It was much easier to use than the black sword or the black scythe. It didn't even require tactics or strategy. All I had to do was run down my target without stopping. I barged through the orcs and sent the monsters flying. Then I turned back the way I came and once again plowed into the squadron. All the while, the metallic voice of Gluttony echoed in my head as my stats rose.
Barbaric, yes. Also surprisingly fun.

The high orc leader raised its voice in a snarling command, and the squadron shifted tactics. The orcs with shields pushed toward the front line, supported by the heavily armed orcs behind them.
“Are those shield orcs going to be a problem?” I asked.
“Nah. Pay those grunts no mind, Fate. Send ‘em all flying. Shove in deep, and give it all you’ve got!”
“Got it. I’ll knock that meat wall past the horizon!”
“That’s the spirit!”
I was basically a one-man stampede. I collided with the orc squadron. They resisted, the black shield shuddering with the impacts of their bodies and weapons as they attempted to hold their ground. But their weight did not stop me. I pushed forward with a roar.
My voice rose in ferocity as I increased my pace, driving into the line of shield-bearer orcs until the grunts gave way with a meaty squelch. The pressure of my advance crushed them against my unbreakable shield.
The orc formation fragmented under my assault. They snorted and squealed in their last bloody moments alive. I continued through, and with every step, the metallic voice of Gluttony updated me on my constantly rising stats.
“Go, Fate! Go! And don’t stop until you’ve reduced them all to quivering orc mince!”
“Do you have to be so gruesome?” I asked. “Can’t you be at least a *little* more delicate with your word choice?”
“Delicate? Pah! Such a word does not exist in the dictionary of Greed.”
Sometimes he talked more like a bludgeoning device than a sword. It was bad enough to be grinding monsters to literal pulp, but worse to have Greed describing the slaughter live as I fought. Between the pulpy remains scattered over the battlefield and Greed’s words echoing in my head, I was being put off all my favorite meat dishes.
I’d had enough playing around with the new ability. I unleashed the full power of my strength and rammed into the regrouping orcs. I left none standing. The shrieking monsters exploded, their bodies painting the wasteland with blooming flowers of blood.

Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +940,800, Strength +921,600, Magic +729,600, Spirit +768,000, Agility +729,600.

The two orc squadrons were in a state of utter collapse, the survivors scattering in panic. Little by little, I ran down the last straggling beasts with the black shield. I could have easily cut them down with a sweep of the black scythe, but I wanted more practice with the blunt feel of this fighting style.
Just as I settled into the weight of the black shield, I noticed the two high orcs turn to flee.
I’d fought orcs a few times now. Their chain of command struck me as tough and totally unforgiving. Orc foot soldiers often gave their lives to

protect the higher-ranking, blue-skinned high orcs. I didn't know what reason or logic their hierarchy relied on. Perhaps it was purely instinctual. Whatever the case, the high orc in charge was everything to its squadron. In a way, it seemed similar to how human citizens were unable to disobey the orders of holy knights.

"What do you want to do, Fate?" said Greed. "Run down those two high orcs with my Shield Bash?"

"No, I'm done. Let's end this."

I was finished with the magic shield today. I transformed Greed into the black bow, pulled back the string, and nocked a black arrow imbued with my magic. Greed guided the arrows, and they never missed their target. My personal archery experience was limited at best, but this bow was easy to handle. However, if I fired straight ahead, any remaining orcs would throw themselves between the arrows and their swiftly retreating leaders. I needed a different angle of attack. I pointed the bow up at the sky and released two shots.

The arrows cut a black arc across the sky, flying over the surviving orcs and plunging into the heads of the fleeing high orcs. The two commanders fell to the ground with a spray of blood, magic arrows sprouting from their skulls.

Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +406,800, Strength +435,000, Magic +350,600, Spirit +308,600, Agility +336,800.

I nodded, satisfied. I felt Gluttony crawl within me, reveling in its feast. For now, it was fine. It had no reason to complain, given the millions of stats I'd just fed it.

Ever since the battle with the chimera Haniel, Gluttony had been strangely quiet. Almost as if it were sleeping. Perhaps it was only a temporary reprieve, but I was grateful for it all the same. Who knew, maybe it was a result of my training to control my Gluttonous urges. I hoped so.

I scanned the battlefield for the few remaining orcs. Their high orc leaders lost, they fell into disarray—some running to attack me, others running for their lives. Without the orders that governed their squadron, the orcs weren't so far removed from goblins or kobolds after all. Any that managed to come close fell to the blade of the black sword. The rest, I picked off from a distance with the black bow.

"Looks like that's all of them," I said finally.

"This should earn you enough gold to buy some new gear," said Greed, "so let's get to chopping ears and head back to Babylon already."

"Yeah, yeah."

I wandered the battlefield, slicing off any ears in recognizable condition and throwing them into the burlap sacks I'd brought. It was tedious work, given the number of orcs and the state they were in. In some ways, rounding up the bounty trophies felt more laborious than the actual fighting. Still, I

made sure to gather every pair I could. By the time I'd collected most of them, the sun had risen high up in the sky.

"Fate," Greed said, "aren't you forgetting something important? The ears of the high orcs?"

"Oh, you're right."

I'd meant to do them last, and here they'd completely slipped my mind. Greed was oddly useful in times like these; he was smart about the strangest things. I was glad his blunt personality still had an eye for detail.

With all the ears finally sliced from orc skulls, I hefted the two bloodstained sacks up on my shoulder. "Well, shall we head back?"

"Seems like a good idea to me, but…looks like we've got company."

I lifted my head at Greed's comment and noticed a large party of adventurers walking toward me. It was the group I'd seen earlier. They'd been fighting another squadron of orcs, and apparently, they'd won their battle too. So why were they heading in this direction, and what did they want with me?

I dropped the two sacks to the ground, unsheathed the black sword, and readied myself for their arrival.

Chapter 7:
No Place to Call Home

THERE WERE ABOUT thirty adventurers in total. Quite the hunting party. The young blond man who led them was no doubt their leader.
He was blandly handsome, equipped entirely with high-quality, fashionable gear. He faced me with an odd smile across his face. I'd never seen a smile that looked so fake.
Who is this? I gripped the hilt of my sword more tightly.
"Calm yourself, Fate," said Greed.
"I want to, but there's something about this guy. He feels off."
The young man seemed not to notice or care about my suspicions. He approached with that mask of a smile across his face, then spoke.
"I'm Northern Alistair. And you, well… You're incredibly strong! I was watching from afar, and your overwhelming power, let's say it left *quite* an impression on me. Will you tell us your name, lone adventurer?"
Northern extended his right hand in search of a handshake. I ignored it and sheathed my sword.
"I'm Corpse. Just another solo adventurer. Nothing more, nothing less. Now, if we're done with introductions, I'd like to take these sacks back to Babylon before the ears rot."
As I picked up the sacks to leave, Northern's party surrounded me. An implicit threat darkened the air. I set the sacks back down and adjusted my skull mask. The party seemed worried about Northern's ego. I suspected these men had pledged loyalty to him, and if he hadn't finished talking, they weren't about to let me go until I'd heard him. To make their point even clearer, they all held their weapons at the ready.
Obedient and short-tempered, I thought. Looks to me like the pervading idea among these goons is that you do what Northern wants, or you die.
But what kind of behavior was this? Would an ordinary party draw their swords on a supposedly friendly conversation? No, I didn't think they would. In that case, why…?
As I grappled with my strange predicament, I finally noticed the weapon hanging at Northern's waist. A holy sword?! So that's what this is about. But even if you're a former holy knight, don't expect my attitude to change.
"So, you're a holy knight…" I muttered.
"Yes, just as you've surmised," Northern said. "Today's one of my rare days off. I came out here to have a little relaxing fun with my troops."
I was sick of this guy and his need for attention already. The gall of calling monster hunting *relaxing fun*. Northern ran a hand through his soft blond hair and smiled at me again. Perhaps that self-assured smile would have charmed me, were I a woman. However, I was far from charmed. His hollow grin filled me with disgust.

Northern was a holy knight—kingdom-employed, not former—so it seemed he thought I'd stolen the two squadrons of orcs from his men. Perhaps I'd made him angry. That was entirely possible, and it would explain why his men continued to surround me, weapons drawn.
I pointed at the two leaking sacks of orc ears. "Are you telling me I should leave these here for you?" I said.
Northern laughed and shook his head.
Are you saying that a mere two sacks aren't enough, then?
I was tired of trying to figure out what these people wanted. Galia was a country ruled by the strong. Unlike in the kingdom, being a little excessive in Galia got you results.
I drew Greed again and pointed the tip of the black sword at Northern. "Rather than wasting more of my time, let's just cut to the chase."
"Now, hang on a second there," said Northern. "It's as I said earlier. You left quite the impression on me."
"So…"
"So, how about becoming one of my men? I'll give you anything you desire."
This was the problem with holy knights. It didn't matter whether you were in Babylon or in Seifort. They were all the same. They thought money and power solved everything and could buy anybody. It was ridiculous. If power solved problems, I wouldn't need to be out here fighting.
"No. Find somebody else. I don't work for anyone, and I don't work with anyone. I have everything I need right here." I showed Northern the blade of the black sword.
Greed's voice echoed in my head. *"Yeah, you tell him!"*
The only master I would ever consider serving was Lady Roxy. The day she left for Galia was the day I had made that decision. I had no intention of working under any other holy knight.
Northern wasn't inclined to leave me alone after one rebuff. "Yes, I saw the capabilities of your black sword while you were in battle. Quite the surprise, that weapon. And it changes form, too. A multi-weapon, they're called. I've seen them in the old scriptures, but finding one out in the wild is quite the shock. I don't suppose you'd let me see it?"
"No. This sword isn't some trifle. I won't simply pass it to a stranger."
"Yeah, you said it!" said Greed. "Cut this try-hard down where he stands. I grant you permission, Fate!"
Northern and I sized each other up until he let out a sigh and waved his hand. In an instant, the men surrounding me sheathed their weapons.
"Very well," Northern said. "In that case, perhaps we can talk about it next time we meet."
I slid Greed back into his scabbard. "There will be no next time. Nobody wants to work with a pushy weasel."
Northern's breezy smile didn't leave his face. "Oh, there definitely will be. Babylon's not *that* big. As for your second point, it so happens that I've

gotten everything I've ever wanted, sooner or later. That's not going to change."

His smile didn't falter as he and his men stepped aside, opening a path for me to leave. I glanced over his men as I passed them. All looked battle-hardened. Northern had probably selected them personally. Handpicked himself a group of useful adventurers who were all too happy to serve under a vaunted holy knight.

What garbage luck… I'm in Babylon for all of two days, and already some holy knight has a target painted on my back.

Was I bound to the holy knights via some inextricable destiny? I ducked through their gauntlet and walked long enough to assume I'd finally gotten clear of Northern and his men when I heard his voice call out behind me.

"By the way, Corpse! You can find me in the Military Sector of Babylon. I'm working under Lady Roxy Hart, who arrived just yesterday. Come play with us sometime. I'll be waiting!"

Damn it! That guy is working under Lady Roxy's command?! Just imagining that smarmy jerk around her makes me…it makes me furious.

On top of that, I felt some nefarious intent around Northern that I couldn't quite define. It wouldn't be easy for an ordinary adventurer like myself to get close enough to Lady Roxy to protect her, so I hoped I was just overthinking the situation. But I swore, if this Northern dared raise a hand against her, I would cut him down.

Northern reminded me of Eris's earlier warning. The air of danger surrounding Lady Roxy was only growing more oppressive. Still, worrying about it wouldn't change anything. I gripped the burlap sacks I carried and walked back to Babylon.

I passed over the border of Galia and filled my lungs with the fresh air of the kingdom. Little by little, the frustration and anger in my heart faded—but not entirely. Some sharp emotion continued to smolder impatiently within my chest. I had never felt this pang before, and I couldn't figure out what the unpleasant feeling was on my own.

"Hey, Greed."

"What's wrong?" asked the black sword. "You don't sound like yourself."

"Well…" I couldn't decide how to describe the feeling. "No, it's nothing."

"No need to pretend to be cool around me. What's up?"

"No, it's fine."

I didn't feel like I could discuss this with Greed after all. I didn't need his ridicule adding to the simmer.

"We got held up by a minor annoyance," I said, "but it's not too late for us to make it to Babylon's trading post in time to buy new equipment."

"Ooh, I've been waiting for this. Waiting…for my beautiful scabbard forged entirely from gold."

What nonsense had he come up with now?! "In your dreams! That would be *way* too heavy to use!"

Greed laughed. "Think of it as weight training! How about it?"

Even with the excuse, it was a tasteless request. Exactly who did he think was rich enough to buy such a gaudy scabbard, anyway? Greed loved extravagance, but I had to keep his tastes at bay. If the black sword had its way, I'd be completely decked out in shiny polished gold. Just imagining the spectacle made me grimace in horror. I'd be the laughingstock of any tavern I entered.

"You already know what I think, Greed," I said. "I just want something modest, easy to wield, and understated. You know what they say—keep it simple!"

"When you say 'simple,' what you mean is 'black.' How dull. How utterly boring and unimaginative."

"What's wrong with black?! It's practical. When you get dirty, it barely shows, and it's good with stains too."

"Yeah, yeah," Greed muttered.

"Keep grumbling about my fashion sense, and you'll end up with a beautiful scabbard forged entirely from black iron."

"Oh no, you don't. You can waltz around in your monochrome getup, but don't you dare try to foist your boring style on me."

"Ha! You're one to talk about foisting!"

He was a perfect example of the pot calling the kettle—well, black. Greed always said what he wanted, trying to convince me to do things his way, and he was completely blind to his own selfish tendencies.

We bickered until the thick adamantite walls of Babylon came into view, and we entered the sentinel city through the main gates to the north. It was time to get our money. Time to buy some clothes and a new scabbard. Finally time to buy armor that really complimented my skull mask.

All of it in black, of course.

Chapter 8:
Greed Style

THE MERCHANTS and adventurers surrounding Babylon's gate stared in shock as I passed through the crowd with my two blood-soaked burlap sacks. I heard their whispers as I walked.
"You must be joking."
"Whoa. Are those fat sacks filled with orc ears? Both of them?!"
"If that's the case, it means he took out two squadrons solo. Who the hell *is* that guy?!"
I heard every word. The whispers turned into open conversations as onlookers gathered. I tried not to wince. It seemed like my name would spread through Babylon quicker than I'd anticipated. Now that I was officially hunting as the adventurer Corpse, there was no need to work in secret, keeping to the night and the shadows. This was not Seifort, where I'd had to live a double life as Corpse and as Lady Roxy's servant. I wasn't exactly doing things the way Greed wanted, but slaying monsters in broad daylight was a big step toward more confidence.
Blood dripped from the two sacks as I walked through the crowds. The trading post was at the end of the main street, on the eastern side of the gates into the Military Sector. According to the landlady at the inn, it was the busiest place in Babylon. The trading post was always full of adventurers, not to mention the kingdom's ever-present soldiers. This made perfect sense to me. More than anything else, adventurers wanted information about monsters and the bounties for them, and I wasn't any different.
I hoped I could avoid any further encounters with arrogant or conceited adventurers who felt they had a right to my time while I shopped. I was a little worried about a particularly rowdy group I spotted on my way down the street. They'd entered the post before I had. How might they react to my arrival? Not that I could do anything about what other adventurers thought.
Greed seemed to notice my worrying, and he piped up through Telepathy.
"Fate, so what if some group of adventurers reacts badly to your arrival? If anyone's rude or disrespectful, you owe them no kindness. Split their head in two. Allow me to help!"
"Would you give the calls for casual violence a break already? If I pick fights over every little insult, I'll make an enemy of the entire city!"
"That should be exactly what you want!"
"Why?! Who would want that?!"
Exactly what kind of awful person did my sword want me to be?! If I did whatever he suggested, I'd be just another wild adventurer riling up

trouble. That, or people would assume—perhaps rightly—that I was completely out of my mind.
“Anyway, brawls aside, what’s important now is that you be a little bolder,” said Greed. “Show some swagger. Some bravado. Isn’t that what I’m always telling you?”
“Yeah, when you’re not telling me to knock heads with anyone I see. But until my Gluttony awakened, nobody treated me like a human being. My old life’s soaked into me. I don’t like to be seen. It’s a hard feeling to shake.”
“How pitiful. To think such a person wields the mighty black sword Greed. Very well, I shall teach you. Just do exactly as I tell you, okay?”
“I’ll try, but nothing excessive, all right?”
“Worry not. Just do as I say.”
Greed’s laughter did nothing to allay my anxieties. Still, it would make him happy if I actually tried to follow his advice.
Babylon was a world where an adventurer’s strength spoke for them. Life would only get harder if I shied away and let somebody like Northern walk all over me. Greed gave me a basic lecture on the habits of courageous adventurers. Finally, with his pointers in my head, I walked into the trading post.
It was amazing—a huge, spacious building, its soaring ceiling decorated with a stained-glass window tastefully crafted in vibrant colors. The window wouldn’t have looked out of place in a cathedral. As I stared up at that breathtaking display, the group of burly adventurers I’d seen in the street surrounded me.
“Quit standing in the door and getting in people’s way, bumpkin. Shove off,” said one.
“Hey, I haven’t seen you before,” said another. “What’s with that ugly skull mask? Which party are you with?”
“And what’s up with those sacks, skull-boy? You running errands for your party because you can’t hang with the big boys? I bet you wear that mask ‘cause you’re real ugly underneath. So ugly you gotta hide it. Go on, take yer mask off.”
It was just as Greed had predicted. Out of the street and into the fire. I wasn’t exactly proud of it, but because I didn’t have the most impressive physique, I looked pretty weak. Still, I was disappointed that the adventurers singled me out so quickly. I supposed there was some sense to Greed’s braggart lecture after all. It was time to put his teachings to work.
“Enough yammering,” I said, doing my best impression of Greed’s deep voice. “I have no business with peons. Unless you’re looking for pain, get out of my sight.”
“Huh?! Wait, what’d you just say, kid?!”
The formerly smirking adventurers flushed red with anger, their mocking looks sharpening to glares. All the same, I knew they wouldn’t unsheathe their weapons inside the trading post. Spilling blood could get you banned

from the building. Unfortunately, you *could* get away with punching people in the face, which was exactly what one adventurer tried to do to me.
I caught the punch with my right hand. “Last chance to change your mind,” I growled.
“Think you can stop me? Try it. I’ve got buddies!”
Buddies, huh? Eight men flanked me in total. If they weren’t going to back down, they were about to get it.
I crushed the adventurer’s curled fist in my hand. He let out a roar of pain as I threw my two sacks of ears high into the air. The man crumpled to the floor, clutching his broken hand, and I kicked him out of the way.
Now there were seven. Three flew at me from the left. I needed to take them out quickly. That meant using Ruinous Strike. I’d absorbed that tech-art from a crowned beast; it was a powerful attack that destroyed your opponent from within. It bypassed armor, inflicting damage on organs, bones, and blood flow alike. It was perfect for swiftly putting opponents out of commission in hand-to-hand combat.
I charged my left fist and punched the ribs of the shortest, stockiest adventurer, then sent a one-two strike into a bald adventurer’s shoulders. The remaining adventurer got a swift kick between the legs. The breaking of their bodies echoed through the trading post. All three men slumped to the ground, drooling and unconscious.
And then there were four…
I expected the last four men to flee, but instead they grasped the weapons hanging at their waists. To do so here in the trading post meant only one thing: murderous intent. I understood that, but I wasn’t about to unsheathe my own weapon in retaliation. I couldn’t get kicked out of Babylon. Not when I still had shopping to do.
Their incoming attacks were basic. Simple. By watching their footwork, as the Blessed Blade had taught me, it was all too easy to predict their clumsy attacks. It was just as easy to bash them into the ground with a few well-placed Ruinous Strikes.
The eight men lay broken on the floor, groaning and unconscious. *I guess that’s as good as they’ve got,* I thought, and I caught the two sacks I’d thrown into the air.
“Well, that takes care of that,” I said.
The unconscious adventurers sprawled across the floor said nothing in reply. Sure, I’d hit them with Ruinous Strike, but had been careful to avoid any really vital organs. None would die, but none would be back to hunting anytime soon. I stepped on their prone bodies as I made my way over to the trading post counter. I usually wouldn’t have gone to such extremes; stepping on the defeated bodies of my enemies had been Greed’s idea. It wasn’t like they didn’t deserve it.
It’s because of rude adventurers like you that ordinary people don’t trust the rest of us, I thought.

I walked through the hushed silence of the trading post with polite thanks to the other adventurers, who hurriedly opened a path for me like they were fleeing my presence.
The girl at the counter greeted me with a smile that had slight tension at its edges. I hoped the nervousness was just my imagination, and I tried my best to be friendly.
“I’d like to trade the contents of these sacks, please,” I said.
“Y-yes!” the girl squeaked. “Please wait while we confirm their contents.”
I placed the two sacks on the counter. They were too much for the girl to handle on her own, so she called for help from the back. The staff were all practiced hands, however, and this was work they were well used to. They finished totaling my hunt in mere moments.
“Er…in total, there are four hundred pairs of orc ears, and two high orcs. Um, just to confirm, did you hunt all these solo?”
“Yes, of course,” I said as I adjusted my mask. “Orcs aren’t really that much trouble.”
There was no need to lie. Compared to the chimera I had fought with Myne, orcs were kind of cute. Still, the girl at the counter went pale when she heard my reply.
Hm? What’s wrong? This can’t be the first brawl she’s seen.
“My apologies,” said the girl. “Are you by chance a holy knight?”
Ah, right.
To the ordinary world, the only people capable of single-handedly taking out a squadron of orcs were holy knights. As long as the Skills of Mortal Sin lingered in the shadows, that *was* the obvious conclusion.
In other words, the receptionist was terrified, because if I was a holy knight, she had no idea what I might do next. She probably feared I’d use the tussle with the adventurers as an excuse to threaten her job by claiming the trading post couldn’t control its own facility or something.
Looks like the pecking order’s no different here than in Seifort. Wherever you go, holy knights are the be-all end-all.
First things first; I needed to put everyone at ease so I could get my money.
“No, I’m not,” I said. “I go by the name Corpse, and I’m just a regular adventurer. I’m no holy knight.”
“Really?” the girl said dubiously.
“Look, you’ll just have to take my word for it. In any case, please prepare my payment. As you can see, I’m in dire need of new gear.”
“Understood. We’ll get it ready as quickly as possible.”
In the end, she presented me with an astounding one hundred gold coins. It turned out that each orc was worth twenty silver, and each high orc worth ten gold. Including the coins I was already carrying, my wallet now contained a hundred and three gold.
Talk about the perfect place to earn riches!
If Myne loved money so much, why didn’t she just stay in Babylon for a while to earn some coin? Then again, Myne had seemed apprehensive about

actually visiting Babylon at all. When I thought about it further, she didn't show even the slightest interest in hunting monsters for money. Perhaps this city represented something to her of which I wasn't aware.

Anyway, my newfound riches left me beaming behind my skull mask. However expensive things were in Babylon, this was surely enough to get me some new equipment. I gave polite thanks to the girl at the counter and began to exit the post in high spirits.

Then a voice called out, stopping me in my tracks.

"It was you, wasn't it? You're the one who started the brawl."

I'd heard that dignified, courageous voice many times before. I turned to find myself facing a holy knight garbed in white. The very holy knight I was hoping to meet *after* I had a chance to replace my tattered rags with new clothes.

I stood face-to-face with Lady Roxy.

Chapter 9:
A Stark Contrast

I ALMOST HAD A heart attack right there. I hadn't expected to see Lady Roxy, of all people, at the trading post. Still, as long as my skull mask hid my identity, everything was fine. There was no way for her to see through it and know I was her friend Fate. She no doubt thought I was just some random weirdo.

I tried to stammer a response, but I caught myself just in time. I had to stop myself from addressing her as though I was her servant. I had quit, and we weren't in Seifort anymore. If I spoke to her subserviently, I would raise her suspicions. I had to be blunt and to the point, to conduct myself like a confident adventurer.

"What of it?" I asked. While I waited for Lady Roxy's response, cold sweat broke out behind my mask.

Lady Roxy pointed at my boots. I was standing on the bodies of the adventurers I'd taken out. "For starters, please get off those poor men," she said.

I'd done it on purpose earlier, but this time, standing on them was entirely accidental. "Ah. Sorry."

I was so nervous that, in trying to step off the one adventurer, I stepped on another. And then another. I felt awful about it, but at least the adventurers were still unconscious. I tried to explain the fight, even though I knew it was a hopeless case. "This was justified self-defense. These men attacked me, and I defended myself."

"I see… So, that's what happened." Lady Roxy placed her hand on her chin in contemplation and nodded to herself.

The eight men remained sprawled across the floor. Four still clasped their weapons, which I was sure worked in my favor. After carefully inspecting the eight men herself, Lady Roxy called over a trading post employee and questioned them about the scuffle.

I waited for her to finish her investigation in a quiet corner of the trading post. Eventually, Lady Roxy nodded to the employee. "Okay, that's everything I need for now. Thank you very much."

She walked back over to me. This time, she seemed much more at ease, even relaxed.

Me, on the other hand, I was a bit taken aback. *Was Lady Roxy always this short?* Back in Seifort, she had been slightly taller than me. Now, I looked down at her. *Did she shrink somehow?! Wait, no, that can't be it.*

Come to think of it, the clothes I wore *had* seemed to be getting shorter. Huh. I'd grown. Through all the fighting to get here, I'd been too busy to notice.

One factor was probably my diet, which had improved significantly since I escaped the starvation wages of the Vlerick family. Back then, the pittance they'd paid me had been barely enough to live on. But since becoming Lady Roxy's servant and then living life as an adventurer, I'd been able to eat my fill of delicious, nutrient-filled foods such as roasted meat.
Back when I'd traveled with Myne to Galia, I had practically emptied my wallet whenever we ate. Naturally, Myne never paid a single coin.
Hm. So maybe life circumstances held back my natural growth spurt. After all, I was still only sixteen. I was pretty sure growth spurts were a normal part of growing up.
"Have you listened to a word I've said?" Lady Roxy asked.
She'd been talking to me while I was lost in thought, and I hadn't caught a thing.
"Y-yeah, of course I have," I said, scrambling to gather my composure. "So, er, what are we talking about?"
"You haven't been listening at all! How would you like to spend a night in prison?"
I blanched. Ugh, anything but that!
However, Lady Roxy laughed at my reaction. The threat had been little more than a bit of playful intimidation. "Very well, I'll ask again. What is your name, adventurer?"
"I am Corpse," I said.
"I see. That's an unusual name, to be sure."
She likely understood that it wasn't my real name. However, it wasn't uncommon for adventurers to use different names for different jobs, and Lady Roxy didn't push me on the subject. I nearly sagged with relief as she moved on.
"I'm willing to overlook this particular incident," she said. "According to the staff, these men have bullied weaker adventurers and stolen their bounties for some time. In the absence of a holy knight to govern the city, they also engaged in a host of other crimes. It's clear to me that—although, in my opinion, you went entirely too far this time—the kingdom also shoulders some blame for neglecting to properly manage the trading post's clientele."
"You have my thanks." I backed away slightly, hoping it looked like I had urgent business elsewhere. "Well, uh, I'll be off."
"Please try to stay out of trouble when you next use the trading post. And also, if at all possible, please buy yourself new clothes. People can't help but…stare…at your body."
Lady Roxy's face flushed a bit pink as she spoke, and she hurried away. I feared she thought I was some kind of pervert with my torn-up outfit. It was clear she didn't know I was Fate, but Corpse hadn't exactly left a great first impression.
Well, at least it's a fake name.
Outside, Lady Roxy called to the soldiers she'd arrived with, and they dragged the unconscious adventurers out of the trading post. Those men

were probably going to prison. I hoped the cold stone floors would cool their heads enough to let them reflect on their actions.
As I left, Greed heckled me through Telepathy.
“You know, I really thought you’d blow it when you saw her,” he said, then burst into laughter. “I mean seriously, Fate, you are a horrible actor. You’re the worst! So stilted! I thought you’d turned to adamantite, you were so inanimate. Maybe you should change your name from Fate Graphite to Fate Adamantite!”
“Shut up.”
“And sooo nervous and flustered, too. Your stammering even gave me a cold sweat, and I’m a weapon! Could you not worry me like that again?”
Damn Greed. The sword was having a wonderful time laughing at my panic.
“Enough already,” I said. “If you keep this up, you can say goodbye to your new golden scabbard!”
“What?! But Roxy and my scabbard are entirely different matters! Entirely different! With all your stammering and stuttering, your acting career is my new favorite hobby! It’s oh-so-pleasing to watch, don’t you think?”
“Stop trying to wheedle a better scabbard out of me! And get a new hobby, while you’re at it.”
I had to make sure that the next time I saw Lady Roxy, I was more composed. I walked toward the Merchant Sector, ignoring Greed’s teasing. It was past time to replace my equipment, and the sooner I got myself into a new outfit, the better.
“Hey, Fate,” said Greed. “Am I right to assume Roxy’s last comment struck a nerve?”
I grit my teeth and didn’t answer. He’d hit the nail right on the head.
“Bingo!” The sword broke into laughter again.
I entered the Merchant Sector and found a shop that looked like it carried what I needed. I was immediately taken by the black light armor displayed in a glass case out front. Not only did it look easy to move in, it didn’t lack for defense either. Metal plates were sewn in to protect everything vital without compromising flexibility. The stitching was top class. It looked like the armor had taken much more work to craft than its price indicated.
I used my Identify skill to examine the armor in more detail.
Wow, the durability is over four hundred?! Regular light armor usually only gets to around one hundred! This is a real quality piece of work.
I wondered what to do. The armor cost eighty gold. I only had a hundred and three gold to my name, which meant I’d spend almost all of it at once. Still, that price was a real bargain.
Just as I was about to head inside the shop, Greed spoke up. “It’s always got to be black with you, doesn’t it? Be a little more flamboyant every now and again, huh? Live it up a little! And what about my golden scabbard?”
“If I don’t have enough money to buy you one now, we’ll just go hunting again after lunch.”

There was no shortage of monsters in Galia, meaning there was no shortage of ways to make money. It was perfect for me, because I wanted to raise my stats anyway. Greed seemed okay with the idea of another round of hunting, and he dropped into a hopefully contented silence.

I pushed the shop door open, revealing a small, relaxed interior. A bell attached to the door chimed. A young man, perhaps two or three years older than me at most, poked his head out from deeper in the shop.

“Welcome! Can I help you wi…” He went dead silent the moment he actually saw me. His eyes grew as wide as dinnerplates as he looked upon the state of my rags.

What’s up with this guy?! Is this what he calls service?!

I considered leaving, but the young man completely ignored my reaction as he scrutinized my clothes. He was getting way too close for comfort.

“Sir…” the young man said, “if you’ll excuse me, what in all hell did you fight to do that to your armor? Why, it looks like you literally threw yourself into a sea of fire! I’ve never seen anything like it!”

Did this guy really just analyze my last major battle by studying the damage it did to my equipment?

That was an incredible talent. However, I didn’t want to reveal too much, so I headed for the door.

“Excuse me, please wait! Please!” The young man maneuvered himself between me and the door. Then he put both hands together as if to ask me for a favor. “Please, sir, consider a craftsman’s humble offer: will you wear my equipment? I’ll give you a half-price discount.”

“Half price?!” I yelped.

“Yes, half price.”

I was shocked. Why the hell would he give me an amazing offer like this out of the blue? The young man read the disbelief on my face and sighed with relief as he explained himself.

Chapter 10:
A Pure Soul

"MY NAME IS JADE STRATOS," the young shopkeeper said. "I'm, er, well, I'm what you'd probably call a novice craftsman. As you can see, I design weapons and armor. Actually, I only just opened my shop. It's been here for about three months now."

Ah, I see. I had a feeling I knew what Jade was getting at.

"So, let me see if I've got this right," I said. "You want me to wear your armor to help advertise your work, yeah?"

"I'm glad you caught on so quickly! I can tell by the state of your equipment that you're a formidable adventurer. So, how about it? I'll discount my goods, and in return, I only ask that you attach this to them."

Jade reached into a drawer and pulled a crest from it. It was the coat of arms for the Stratos Armory, Jade's shop.

With this crest stitched onto my gear, people would be able to tell at a glance where I'd bought it.

"Look," I said, "are you sure I'm the guy you're looking for to pull this off? What if I'm not the adventurer you think I am? If I go out there and do something crazy, it's going to be hell for your reputation."

Two examples sprang to mind: openly opposing the will of a holy knight, and getting involved with the Seifort army to fight the Divine Dragon. The more I thought about it, the more I realized just how many bad events I could soon be in the middle of.

However, Jade just laughed. "You're a bit of a worrywart, aren't you? That's just adventuring, isn't it? You're an adventurer, so march right on out there and, you know, do your adventuring things! You guys don't worry about the consequences of your actions. You live in the moment. You're arrogant and sometimes—maybe often—violent. That's just how adventurers are! Isn't that adventuring? Occasionally, when I think about the lives you adventurers live—never knowing if the next day will be your last—I think about how us merchants aren't too different, really!"

"How so?" I asked, baffled.

Jade suddenly looked a little bashful. He scratched his nose as he explained. "I mean, we're searching for fame and glory in our own way, you know? I want to start out by becoming the best-known armorer in Babylon, then work my way up to doing the same thing across the entire kingdom. But I can't do that simply by crafting the best gear. I have to find the right adventurers to make myself known, and we have to reach for those heights together. Well, that's the path I aim to walk, anyway."

Jade spoke of his hopes with great intensity. I was genuinely impressed at his lofty ambitions. I didn't think there were many craftsmen as young as Jade with such a clear vision. I knew exactly how to respond.

“If you really believe in your goal that much, then I’d be a fool to refuse your offer. We have an accord. Jade, you can call me Corpse.”
“No need to be so formal! We’re partners now.”
I extended my right hand and Jade took it in his own with a firm grip. Our exclusive deal was signed with a handshake. From now on, I’d use the gear Jade supplied. But only his armor. I couldn’t imagine using any weapon but Greed.
Jade took the light armor in the display case and made some adjustments to accommodate my size. Not long after, he came out from the back room and presented it to me.
“I made a few small adjustments. What do you think?”
“It…it looks awesome.”
I took the black armor and noticed the red fabric sewn to the inner lining.
“The red is only visible in flashes, like when you spin, or if you jump through the air,” Jade explained. “Consider it a hidden accent. Why don’t you try it on?”
“Good idea.”
I put the armor on, and it was *amazing*. Jade seemed to instinctually understand the size and height of my body, even though we’d only just met. The fit was perfect, and the gear was easy to move in too.
This guy, he’s the real deal.
I knew then that in the not-so-distant future, Jade’s name was destined to echo through the world for his amazing craftsmanship. It wouldn’t matter whether he’d met me or not. I shook in excitement. Jade’s armor was leagues ahead of the equipment I’d bought in Seifort.
“How’s the fit, Corpse?” Jade asked.
“It’s even better than I expected. I feel stronger just wearing this!”
“Ease up on the compliments, or they’ll go straight to my head!” Jade laughed. “How about a pair of boots to go with it?”
“You read my mind.”
A light armor set, a pair of boots, a belt, and some fingerless gloves. All together, they came to a grand total of eighty gold. Changing out of my old gear and into the new, I admired myself in the store’s mirror. I know it was probably arrogant, but I really liked the way I looked. At a glance, everything was black, but with movement there were small, striking flashes of red.
I smiled. Now, there’d be no problem the next time I bumped into Lady Roxy.

“The clothes maketh the man, indeed,” said Greed.
“Aren’t you tired of saying that?” I asked.
That was the exact phrase he’d used when I first bought equipment in Seifort. Didn’t my new look deserve more praise?
Jade observed our bickering with a spark of curiosity in his eyes. I realized I’d fallen back into my bad habit of talking to Greed in public. To anyone who didn’t know better, I was just a creep muttering at his sword. I couldn’t believe I’d been so careless after Jade and I literally just agreed to this exclusive partnership! Sweat beaded my forehead.
“Ah, it’s so clear,” said Jade. “You really love your weapon, don’t you, Corpse? I can tell. I talk to the weapons and armor I make, too. But, just like yours, those conversations of mine are a one-way street. Naturally, all the other merchants think I’m enormously odd for it.”
Now that shocked me. Jade was even weirder than I was. And he’d lumped us together. I could have told him I actually *was* conversing with my sword, but that might have meant revealing my Gluttony too. I decided to let it go.
For a time, Jade happily went on showing me different types of equipment he made. After a moment, he took a long look at Greed. “You know, that scabbard is pretty beaten up, isn’t it? Would you let me make you a new one?”
I considered Jade’s offer. If the new scabbard wasn’t crafted to Greed’s specific tastes, I’d never hear the end of it. I quietly asked Greed what he thought about the idea. The sword seemed to recognize Jade’s abilities too, because he said it was worth giving the young craftsman a shot.
“If you’d be happy to make it,” I said, “then I’d be happy to use it.”
“Really?! In that case, may I look at your sword for a moment?”
“Sure.”
I unsheathed the black sword and showed it to Jade. The young man froze at the sight, his mouth hanging open in shock.
“Jade? Are you okay?”
I shook Jade gently until his senses returned. Even then, he gazed at the black sword. Finally, a quiet sigh escaped his lips.
“This weapon…” he mumbled. “It’s so perfectly crafted. I’ve never seen a one-handed sword like it, never in my life. It’s *incredible*.”
Greed was over the moon. His ego was sky-high anyway, but now I’d never hear the end of it.
“Did you catch that, Fate? Some people just sense quality. I can try to hide my divine craftsmanship, but it oozes from my blade!” The sword laughed heartily. “Go on. You can praise me too. I will allow it.”
We needed to decide on a color for the scabbard while Greed was in high spirits. No way was I going with all gold. Gold was the color holy knights loved, and anyway, I wanted the scabbard to match the rest of my black gear. However, going full black would lead to whining. Perhaps there was still a way to accommodate both our desires?

“Jade, could you make the scabbard mainly black, but also add something a little decorative? Some accents?”
“Yes, of course. Exactly what kind of accents do you have in mind?”
“Something in gold. But not too much. Just a little.”
“I see…” Jade looked thoughtful. “Okay. I’ve got it. I’ll craft a scabbard truly worthy of your blade. But I should tell you in advance that this will take some work. A scabbard to match a perfect sword like this won’t come cheap. Are you okay with that?”
Jade hadn’t seen fit to warn me about the price of my armor. Just how much labor and material did he plan to put into this scabbard?
My mouth went dry, but I had to ask. “Uh…so, how expensive are we talking here?”
“Well, I’ll make it cheap for you. We’re looking at about five hundred gold.”
Five hundred gold?! I coughed in shock. How was Greed’s scabbard so much more expensive than my equipment?! I couldn’t wrap my head around it.
“That’s fair,” said Greed. “Actually, five hundred gold is a bargain. That Jade, he really knows me. He gets me. I’m sure he’ll do an amazing job. I concede my artistic vision and accept these conditions.”
Greed was all in on Jade’s scabbard now. If I backed out here, he would be on my case until the day I died. Still, all I had left was twenty-three gold. Considering things like paying rent for the evening, I had to keep at least three gold.
I sighed and turned back to Jade. “Would it be okay if I paid in installments? I can only give you twenty gold right now.”
“Of course. I’ll put the remaining four hundred and eighty on your tab. I’ll need about a week to prepare the scabbard.”
Once we settled our negotiations, Jade got to work measuring Greed. He let out a few sighs of admiration as he did so, but other than that, he was very, very quick.
“I’ve got everything I need,” Jade said, winding up his measuring tape. “Come back in a week! I’ll be waiting with the finest scabbard I can craft!”
“I look forward to it. Until then, I’ll get to work paying it off.”
I left the shop, straightened my skull mask, and looked toward the sky. The sun was setting. The day was already almost over.
I wondered what I should do next. One day, and my wallet was yet again almost empty. Perhaps it was best to head back to the inn. Their nightly fee was only fifty silver, so that wouldn’t be any trouble. As long as I was careful about extra bills for food and drink, everything would be fine. My only problem was the landlady’s incredible persuasiveness. I had a slight fear I’d end up drinking another night away.
If I was really worried about that, I could always go night hunting. Back in Seifort, that had been my norm, so I was actually more comfortable hunting after dark. With my Night Vision skill, I could see clearly even if the moon was hidden behind the clouds.

Yes, night hunting sounded good. I headed back to the inn, crossing the main street from the Merchant Sector into the Residential Sector. On the way, I walked by drunken adventurers holding each other up as they wandered along sloshed and happy. It seemed their hunts had gone well. Now that I had most of my gear sorted out, I hoped I might be just like them at the end of my hunting expedition tomorrow.

I arrived at the battered inn with its cracked, fading facade, and I headed inside.

"Ah! Welcome back!" cried the landlady. "Wow, what happened? I almost didn't recognize you!"

She laughed her gruff laugh and looked me up and down like she was drinking in my appearance. Then she slapped my shoulder. "Looks like you found some nice equipment! Must have cost you quite the pretty penny, huh?"

"Yeah, it did," I said. "The prices here in Babylon just keep on surprising me."

"You'll get used to them. Well, if you're a serious adventurer, anyway."

"Hey, I only just got here! I don't need any extra pressure."

The landlady burst into laughter. "You must be hungry! How about we start getting dinner ready? My daughters have been looking forward to dinner with you all day!"

"Just to be clear, I'm not going to drink like I did last night," I said.

"Hey, now, there's no need to be so uptight! Let's not speak so hastily, yeah?"

The landlady dragged me into the dining room. Her daughters were already seated at the table, waiting for me. Meanwhile, the table itself was covered with bottles of alcohol, a few of which were expensive-looking vintages I'd never seen before. I suddenly envisioned my remaining three gold as a candle in the wind.

"No need to be frugal," the landlady said, beaming. "Let's celebrate your first day here! Am I right, or am I right?"

"Please," I said weakly, "go easy on me." My gold was as good as gone.

Guess I should eat to get ready for a big day of hunting tomorrow!

I returned to my room that night, collapsed into my bed, and closed my eyes. As the ceiling above swirled to the rhythm of everything I'd drunk, my consciousness faded into darkness.

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When I came to, I found myself standing in a world I did not know, entirely alone. I looked up at a sky of pure white. Even the ground I stood on was that same unvaried hue. Wherever I walked, the featureless landscape stretched out before me. As far as the horizon, and likely beyond it: all that same stark white. I didn't even cast a shadow.

What is this place? Why am I here?

I stared at the expanse while I paced, and then a girl appeared before me—a girl also of pure white. She smiled and gazed at me with a stare I couldn't hold because of the crimson that stained her eyes.
"We're…finally…connected…" she said.
I'd seen her before. I *recognized* her. She was the girl fused to the core of Haniel. The girl I had fought with Myne.
"You," I said. "You're…"
"The…before…you…"
The girl tried to say something to me, but I couldn't understand her message. Staccato noises and crackling broke up her voice. She was trying to tell me something important. I tried to understand. Strained to listen. Ultimately, my efforts came to nothing.
I tried to get closer to the girl, but the landscape slipped into a shadow devoid of light. My feet gave way underneath me, and I plummeted into an abyss.
I screamed.
The girl stood unmoving in her place, watching me sorrowfully as I fell. I tore my gaze from her toward the darkness below. Stretched out beneath me were piles of all the people and monsters I had devoured, heaped atop one another in gruesome mounds. They writhed in agony in this world of flickering red. Only one word would ever accurately describe a place such as this…
Hell.
I awoke abruptly, covered in sweat and gasping for air. I felt awful.
What was that?!
For a dream, it had been unusually vivid. Unusually *real*. Even awake, the details burned in my mind. The dream's meaning was vague, and I couldn't recall the whole thing clearly, but the sensation of falling into that dark-crimson abyss gave me terrible chills.
I…I felt guilty for devouring that poor girl's soul to defeat Haniel. That must have been where the dream came from. Even then, what had she tried to tell me?
All through the night, I couldn't shake the broken echo of her message, or the sorrow painted across her features as she gazed upon me.

Chapter 11:
Components for the Black Scabbard

FOR THE NEXT FOUR DAYS, I was devoted to the hunt. I barely had a coin to my name, and I needed to earn money to pay for both my lodging and the scabbard I'd ordered. Here in Galia, it didn't matter how many orcs you took down. There were always more. So far, I'd faced nothing on the level of a large-scale stampede, but it seemed Galia suffered no shortage of monsters.

This day was no different. I'd secured a nice, big haul, three whole burlap sacks full of orc ears taken from the heads of three squadrons. Those sacks, dripping with blood, were the gory proof of my work. As I carried them through the gates of Babylon, other adventurers looked on with envy in their eyes.

At first, everyone had assumed I was some kind of errand boy. However, as the days went by and I kept hauling in enormous numbers of orcs, their estimation changed. They admired me. Because I never joined a party or teamed up with anyone, though, I also drew much ire and jealousy.

In Greed's opinion, any adventurer who got angry at a rookie over a minor territory dispute had no business in Babylon. Nevertheless, a group of these like-minded, petty sorts formed a gang, and on my fourth day of hunting, they blocked my path to the Babylon trading post.

"Oi! You, there! The runt!"

Twenty adventurers this time. They'd gone recruiting. On the third day, there had been only eight. Still, I could tell at a glance that none of them was anything special. No wonder they relied on numbers.

Do these guys really think they can beat me because there are a few more of them, or are they just stupid?

Whatever their strategy, they trotted out the same old line I'd heard every day since they started. Today, it was the burliest, bearded adventurer who spoke. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to leave those sacks right there, and as penance for stealing our hunting grounds, you're going to let us beat you to a pulp."

The street exploded into a sea of combat before I had a chance to reply. To be honest, I was getting tired of this routine. None of them ever listened to reason.

"You lot really don't learn from your mistakes, do you?" I said. "Don't you understand you don't have a chance?"

"Shut up, skull-face! Ever since you started hunting around here, we can't get any work," the bearded man growled.

"Say what you want about my methods, we share a goal. I need money."

That blustery adventurer, who really did have quite the impressive beard, brought his long sword down in a slash toward my neck. I caught it between my thumb and index finger, stopping it in place.
“What the hell? What kind of monster are you?! Release my sword, you scrawny, skeletal idiot!”
“If I let go, you’ll just attack me,” I said, which I thought entirely reasonable.
“Of course I’ll attack you! I’ll chop off that arm so you can’t ever hunt again!”
Didn’t I just say they never listened? So much bluster. The adventurers surrounding the bearded one shouted angrily and rained blows down on me, forcing me to twist to avoid their strikes. In a way, these ambushes made for good training. But come on, I was on my way home from hunting three orc squadrons. I just wanted to relax and have some time to myself.
I flipped the long sword out of the bearded adventurer’s hand and into my own. Then I drove it into the cobblestones. The shriek of steel echoed through the streets as the blade snapped in half.
“What have you done?! That sword cost me ten gold…” The bearded adventurer crumpled before his broken sword, weeping.
Ten gold? That’s a whole high orc bounty, I thought. Guess his sword was more expensive than it looked. Well, at least that’s one of them out of my hair.
Seeing that bearded adventurer wilt into his soul-crushing defeat gave me an idea.
Greed caught on to my plan just as I thought of it. *“Time for an encore, Fate.”*
“Yeah, it seems like the most efficient way to take care of this.”
I set my three bloody sacks on the ground and unsheathed Greed. The instant I did so, the arrogant adventurers lost their bluster, the whole group taking a few steps back. If this was how they acted the moment a weapon was drawn, they wouldn’t survive long outside these walls. In that sense, I was doing them a favor.
“Damn that bony bastard! He thinks we’re scared because he drew his damn sword?! Get him!”
The bandanna-wearing leader of the gang gave his signal, and the rest rushed in with a collective roar. They bristled with equipment—swords, spears, bows, and even a spellcaster’s staff. If I let this brawl go on too long, we’d cause serious trouble for anyone walking by. We’d also draw the attention of any nearby soldiers, who would come running toward our commotion. It was past time for me to relieve myself of this nuisance.
“Let’s do it, Greed!”
The black sword laughed. “Let nothing stand before my blade! Slice those sorry jokes they call weapons into pieces!”
As Greed cackled, I dashed straight through the crowd of adventurers, in and out before they had a chance to react. My swift strike was followed by

shouts of surprise and the clatter of breaking metal. I turned to watch the shards of their shattered weapons fall to the street. The sorrowful cries of the adventurers wafted to my ears.
“My spear…! I spent fifteen gold on it!”
“No! Not the bow! I saved eight whole gold for that!”
“This staff was a family heirloom… What do I do now?! What will I tell my parents?!”
It seemed all these bullies had spent quite a sum on their arsenal. However, had they been worthy of quality weapons? I hoped this setback encouraged them to stop bothering people and take their frustrations out on worthwhile targets—you know, like orcs.
“Looks like you’ve lost your weapons,” I said. “You wanna keep going, or…?”
One of the adventurers spat on the road. “We won’t forget this!” he snarled. The rest stamped their feet, faces red with rage, but one after another, they turned and ran off down the street. I had a feeling they’d be back soon enough. I’d just have to break their weapons all over again. Eventually they’d run out of money, right? Hopefully, they’d soon be too busy to bother me.
Greed chuckled. “What remarkable patience, to endure such trivial annoyances for so long. How very like you, Fate.”
“Yeah, well… Let’s get out of here.”
Our little ruckus had drawn a crowd, and it wouldn’t be long before soldiers showed up. I hefted the three sacks I’d left on the ground over my shoulder and continued to the trading post. On the way, a few soldiers ran past me toward the intersection where the fight had broken out. The clank of their armored footsteps soon faded into the distance. Luckily, I seemed to have escaped a second confrontation.
The kingdom managed Babylon’s trading post, and no one else posted bounties for hunts. No matter how many monsters I slew, I’d have no way to earn compensation if they banned me from the trading post for misbehavior. As long as the soldiers never caught me beating up those blockheads, I was fine.
I strolled down the main street until the gates to the Military Sector came into view. Somewhere beyond those gates, Lady Roxy worked. Four days had passed since our surprise reunion at the trading post. It wasn’t far from the main gates, so her presence there wasn’t uncommon. I figured she had to be too busy to keep a close eye on the post…but, just in case, I peered inside the building before I entered.
“Looks like we’re in the clear.” I sighed with relief.
“You are absolutely pathetic, Fate. I keep telling you: Be bold. Be ambitious. Be confident! Don’t just scurry around, live it up!”
“Yeah, yeah, I know. But I have to work my way up to your kind of confidence!”

No matter what Greed said, I couldn't quite rid myself of the guilt I felt whenever I met Lady Roxy while wearing my mask. I worried she'd discover my true identity.

"You call yourself the wielder of the black sword Greed?! The man who holds this mighty blade should live with such confidence that petty concerns wither before him!"

"Easy for you to say, you're a sword. But for me, well…"

The boy Fate was supposed to be living safely back at the Hart estate. I didn't want to be found out by Lady Roxy. I tried explaining myself to Greed again, but he insisted I had the wrong of it. I could sort of see his point.

"I know, I know," I said. "I get it. I'll try to at least be the same fellow I was last time I came through here."

"That's what I'm talking about. Then you'll truly have the right to call yourself the man who wields me!" Greed cackled as I stepped into the trading post.

As always, the wondrous light from the stained-glass window set high above filled the hall.

"It doesn't matter how many times I see this place, it still looks absolutely astounding," I said.

A voice I knew all too well responded from behind me. "It really does, doesn't it? It was originally built as a shrine to the god Laplace. Hello again, Mr. Corpse."

I turned to find Lady Roxy standing right there. *But I was so careful!*

Oblivious to my surprise, Lady Roxy continued. "It looks like you've hunted even more than the last time we met. Nearly everyone in Babylon has heard your name by now."

"I still have a long way to go," I said. "The famed adventurers of Galia hunt more monsters than me, and with ease."

"You think so? I haven't been here for very long, admittedly, but I've yet to meet another who hunts the way you do."

I shrugged that off with a laugh, then ducked aside to make my escape.

Lady Roxy called after me. "Wait! I want to ask you something! Why are you always running away?!"

She began to sprint after me, but her attempt was interrupted. A few soldiers had arrived with an urgent message. Whatever the matter, it looked serious, because she left swiftly through a door marked for authorized personnel. The resolute look on her face didn't at all resemble that of the cheerful young woman I'd grown used to.

"I wonder what that's all about?" I said.

"Who knows? A stampede, maybe?"

"Must be small, in that case. If it were a large-scale stampede, the sirens would ring."

"Even in small stampedes, there can be groups of monsters too feisty for regular adventurers to handle. But enough yammering, go get your money."

Ever since my fight in the trading post, strong soldiers had been put on guard duty to watch over the place. Thanks to them, nobody started anything in here, so I could cash in my bounty without worry. Unfortunately, the presence of guards didn't stop people from whispering about me.

"Look, it's that Corpse. He's here again."

"Three sacks?! He's going to make a killing today. If he keeps this up, there's going to be nothing left for the rest of us!"

"You said it. That rookie's too big for his britches. To think we invited him to our party, *and* he turned us down…"

The whispering group nodded and mumbled in agreement. They were a real pain in the neck. They couldn't say anything to my face, so they muttered their grievances behind my back.

"What's wrong, Fate?" asked Greed. "If I were you, I'd strike some real fear into the hearts of those losers."

"Let it go. They're cockroaches. There's always more."

I called out to the girl at the counter. Since I hunted in such large quantities, I now got directed to a specific, somewhat-private trading counter. On one hand, it was great, because I didn't have to deal with the line. On the other hand, special treatment bought me the scorn and envy of my peers.

I put my sacks on the cart below the counter. "Just here to turn in today's hunt," I said.

"Yes, sir! Wow, it seems like you hunted a few more orcs than usual," said the girl, her ponytail swaying energetically as she spoke. "You know, you only just got here, but you're already one of the top three earners in Babylon, Mr. Corpse!"

It was nice to receive such a kind compliment, but because most of the money was going toward Greed's scabbard, I didn't feel like I'd actually *earned* much. After a short time counting up the ears and preparing my money, the girl returned to the counter.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's see here… So, in total, we've got six hundred orcs plus three high orcs. All together, that's a hundred and fifty gold coins."

One hundred and fifty gold was quite the sum, and also quite heavy. Walking around with all that would get cumbersome. Thankfully, I could let the trading post handle it.

"Please send the money to Jade Stratos," I said. "He's a craftsman in the Merchant Sector with whom I have an exclusive deal."

"Understood. You're sending him this as payment, then?"

Regular trading posts never handled money in this way. However, because the monster situation in Galia was so extreme, the Babylon trading post allowed this kind of transaction. Some people kept their earnings at the trading post until they withdrew them all at once when they left Babylon.

I took my receipt from the girl at the counter and rushed off to Jade's armory. I'd finally paid off the scabbard, and the only task left now was to pick it up.

I headed north via the main street, entered the Merchant Sector on the east side of Babylon, and went down a few small side streets to the door of Jade's armory. Inside, the relaxed air of the shop invited me to slow down and peruse the weapons and armor neatly arranged throughout. The whole setup felt like a perfect reflection of its owner.

The doorbell rang as I stepped inside, and at the lively sound, a young man poked his head out from the workshop at the back. Judging by the dark circles under Jade's eyes, he'd only just woken up.

"Ah, Corpse! Good morning."

"Jade, it's already noon," I said.

"Oh, is it? Well, good day, then."

Jade had completely lost track of time.

"You seem tired," I said.

His eyes widened with manic passion. "I'm so close to finishing your scabbard—just one step away! But I'm out of a necessary component."

That component, according to Jade, was a special crystal gathered deep within Galia. Usually, the kingdom's army stockpiled it during their expeditions into the region. However, army deliveries had recently stopped. Jade had tried to find a substitute, but despite all his research, he couldn't find any materials with the crystal's specific properties. He'd searched so frantically that he'd lost sleep, which was why he looked so exhausted.

"Do you have any idea when the next shipment of this crystal is due?" I asked.

"It's called duskstone, specifically. Though I don't know the particulars, I've heard it only grows under very specific circumstances. The kingdom's army completely controls the supply, so if they say they don't have any shipments, there's nothing I can do about it."

In other words, until the army trekked out to get more—whenever they felt like doing so—we had no idea when we'd get hold of any duskstone.

"A pity," I said. "And just when I finally paid off the scabbard."

"I'm sorry," said Jade. "I know you were looking forward to it, and I couldn't meet the deadline we agreed to…"

I understood just by looking at him that he'd done his very best. He'd obviously done everything in his power to find a duskstone substitute.

Jade's eyes suddenly lit up. "What if *you* go and gather the crystals? I can even throw in a little discount—you'd be doing me a big favor."

"Me? Is duskstone easy to gather, then?"

"Quite so, I hear. The difficult part is *getting* to it. It's found deep in the Galian wastes. That's why only the army harvests it, typically, and only on the most arduous expeditions. But I don't think it would be a problem for you, Corpse."

"I think you might be overestimating me, Jade."

“You think I haven’t heard the news? You’re one of Babylon’s top three earners!”
I knew just who’d told him. That ponytailed receptionist was a real gossip. At this rate, my landlady would hear about it in no time at all. What a terrifying thought. I could already see my hard-earned wages dancing off into her pockets as she went above and beyond to provide me with richer foods, rarer wine, and even more exceptional service.
“Someone as strong as you should be able to make the trip there and back, surely,” Jade said. “Especially if you’re the trustworthy, reliable adventurer I think you are.”
It seemed I didn’t have much of a choice. I’d meet Jade’s expectations in the hopes that he’d meet mine for the scabbard.
“All right, I’ll do it. But I’ll need a map so I know where to go.”
“Hold on, just one second.” Jade searched a neatly arranged bookshelf. He took an old parchment from a shelf, along with an old map. “I got this from my master back when I apprenticed as a blacksmith. He was in the army and drew this map himself when he was young. It documents where they gather the duskstone. I’ll give you a copy.”
“Thank you. Wow, it really is quite deep into the region, isn’t it?”
When Jade said the kingdom’s army gathered duskstone on arduous expeditions, I hadn’t realized he meant such *long* ones. This trip went even farther into Galia than Myne and I had traveled to her ruined village. According to the map Jade gave me, the crystals were several times farther south than that. It pointed to a great canyon carved out of the land, inside of which I would find my new target.
“There’s supposed to be a host of other rare materials as well. You could make a great deal of money collecting some.”
“Now that’s interesting.”
The Divine Dragon hadn’t been seen near the border recently, so it was a good time for me to head out. If I happened to get my hands on other valuable materials, I could earn myself a hefty bonus, too. Also, with my increased stats, I could run at an unbelievable speed for a considerable distance. Even if I took it easy, I figured I could make it to the canyon and back in about four days.
“I’ll see you soon then, Jade.”
“I’ll be counting on you!” Even through his exhaustion, Jade had an excited gleam in his eyes.
“You got it!”
With that, I headed out.

Chapter 12:
On the Trail of the Kingdom's Army

FROM JADE'S SHOP, I headed straight to the part of the Merchant Sector where I could buy traveling supplies. Once I stocked up on food that would last—jerky, dried fruit, rye bread—I was ready to head out. I didn't need to bring any burlap sacks with me this time, because I wasn't hunting much. I would only need to hunt enough to satisfy the cravings of my Gluttony.
The gates of Babylon faced away from the border, so I had to head north to leave the city, then wrap around south to enter Galia. As I passed through the gates, adventurers passing by stared at me in utter shock.
"They think you're heading out for another hunt already," said Greed, chuckling. "You really are a greedy one, aren't you?"
Very funny.
"I'm not half as bad as you," I said. "Weren't you listening to Jade? Who do you think I'm doing all this work for, anyway? That scabbard is over ten times as expensive as my armor."
"Of course it is! It's worthy of my blade. Really, you're getting a bargain, Fate."
I suppose, being a sword, he didn't have much to be particular about besides his scabbard. The one I used now was worn from countless battles, the leather cracked and the metal bent, making it hard to draw Greed smoothly. In fact, every time I sheathed or unsheathed the black sword, I heard Greed's voice: *"I have absolutely had it with this scabbard, damn it!"*
So, honestly, the new scabbard was my first priority. It would at least shut Greed up for a little while. We'd been together long enough that I understood him; when he was happy and satisfied, he fell silent so that he could truly enjoy the moment.
"All right! Greed, let's go gather some crystals!"
"Finally! The journey for my scabbard begins! Onward!"
I ran past the gates and stepped over the border into the Galian region. I was immediately hit by the now-familiar, but still awful, smell of blood. The air here surrounded and suffocated, and even having crossed the border many times now, I couldn't get used to the change to this strange other world.
"The way Galia reeks of slaughter… I hate it."
"Quit your whining. This is for the sake of my beautiful scabbard. Now run, Fate!"
Greed was in especially high spirits. Perhaps he was excited to be in the spotlight for a change. All the same, the one actually doing the work was, as always, me.
Wherever I looked, Galia stretched out in desolate ruin all the way to the horizon. It was a land devoid of greenery. The only thing resembling fauna

was a strange moss that occasionally dotted the rocky ground. The moss grew as tall—or a bit taller—than me, and sometimes spores burst from it.
“Hey, Greed,” I said. “What happens if you breathe those in?”
“Oh, the spores? If I remember correctly, inhaling too many lets the moss take root in your lungs.”
“Seriously?!”
“Take a closer look. From certain angles, that moss sure seems to have a human shape, right?”
“Wait, you’re not saying that moss used to be human, are you?”
“That’s exactly what I’m saying. So don’t go huffing that crap if you can help it.”
No way would I do something so disgusting! It was worse now that I knew the growths had once been human. I decided to keep a safe distance and skirt around. I could already imagine the moss creeping into my lungs and growing through me, reducing me into decomposing Moss Fate.
Greed laughed. “Moss Fate! Ha ha ha!”
“It’s not funny! Stop laughing! And stop reading my mind!”
“As if I need to. Your feelings spill out from your whole body. Even with that mask on, you’re an open book!”
“You don’t have to rub it in!”
Greed laughed.
“I said, stop laughing!”
So, instead, Greed cackled.
“Now you’re just being creepy!”
I couldn’t put up with his awful sense of humor any longer, so I took my hand from the sword and let the telepathic cackling fade away. I continued on, passing the mossy human remnants and their deadly spores. A little farther onward, orcs appeared here and there along my path.
“Seems we’re officially deeper into Galia now,” I said.
“So, you’ve finally learned to navigate the land based on the orc density. At least we don’t have to fret about being lost anymore.”
The settlements of orcs—usually known as colonies—were a long way south from our location. According to the available historical records, the orc colonies sat at Galia’s southernmost point. Supposedly, the orc population was so numerous there that they were impossible to count. Fortunately, as you headed north, the orc numbers fell significantly.
The desecrated, cracked earth spread out in every direction. There was nothing to use as a real landmark, and even compasses were of little use here. The temperamental Galian weather meant that clouds covered the sky with little warning, making navigation by sun, moon, or stars extremely difficult.
For this reason, local adventurers differentiated north and south by way of orc density. As long as you could orient north from south, you could do the same for east and west.

It was said that the infamous stampedes originated from the southern orc colonies. Endless turf wars took place there, driving losing hordes out. Ousted orcs then pushed north, looking to establish new colonies. Most of these hordes were what we called squadrons: a hundred orcs, plus the high orc leading them.
On occasion, traveling hordes met and mixed. The resulting larger horde drew more monsters, even crowned beasts, until their numbers grew truly frightening. This was what the citizens of Babylon referred to as a death parade. Against this class of stampede, even a sizable party of twenty or thirty adventurers was useless. They'd be swept under and crushed in the blink of an eye.
Death parades had to be dealt with by holy knights and the armies under their command. Fighting alongside tens of thousands of tough, well-trained soldiers, holy knights met these stampedes head-on, held them back, and even fended them off. I could only imagine what it felt like to see an incoming wave of seemingly infinite monsters. Facing such a wave was an act of incredible courage.
This savage reality was why the adventurers of Galia were rarely as boastful or arrogant as those in Seifort.

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I had attracted the orcs' attention, and they clutched their handmade weapons at the ready. I unsheathed Greed and continued toward them without slowing my approach.
"If you waste your time playing with weaklings, we'll never get where we're going," said Greed.
"I know. That's why we'll use this."
I transformed the black sword into the black shield and prepared to break through the orcs' ranks.
"Ah, the Shield Bash," said Greed. "Classic. Now you're getting it!"
"It's perfect for forcing our way through a crowd!"
I pumped my legs and picked up speed. The orcs launched arrows and fire magic, but against the impervious black shield, their attacks meant nothing. Anything that stood in my path was smashed skyward.
There was just something *fun* about using the shield in battle. I listened to the rhythmic whacks as the orcs' bodies hit the shield and messily flew to their dooms.
All the while, the metallic voice echoed in a corner of my mind.

Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +156,800, Strength +153,600, Magic +121,600, Spirit +128,000, Agility +121,600.

Hm, that's thirty-two. The metallic voice had some interesting side benefits. I could calculate the orc kill numbers from the totals it reported.

“You’re on a roll, Fate!” Greed cackled.
“Launching and lunching! The perfect snack for an empty stomach!” I crowed. *You’re all in my way! But not for long!*
It’d been a while since I’d fought so freely, and for a time, Greed and I were lost in the joy of unfettered violence.
“Fate, two orcs sighted! Dead ahead!”
“And soon to be actually dead!” This time, Greed’s sense of humor meshed with mine perfectly.
The last two orcs between me and the way ahead soared into the sky and out of sight. I’d made a mess of their formation, and before the survivors had a chance to surround me, I pushed through their back line and past the squadron entirely. Fireballs and arrows followed me from behind, but I’d gained too much ground for the missiles to find their mark. I had crystals to harvest, after all; I couldn’t stay to finish off these small fry.
Since arriving in Babylon, I’d wrecked the local orc population so thoroughly that their numbers had noticeably thinned. If this group continued their journey north, they’d find other adventurers with whom to do battle.
The squadron of orcs shrank to a tiny dot behind me, then disappeared from sight. I continued onward until I spotted a great flag flapping in the wind. It belonged to the kingdom’s army. They were still too far away for me to make out the expedition clearly, but it looked to be a single squadron. That was strange. It was more common to send three squadrons for any expedition this far from Babylon. That meant that, whatever this squadron was up to, it was in a hurry.
“Hey, Greed,” I said through my Telepathy. “What do you think?”
“Looks to me like they’re heading in the same direction as we are.”
“Yeah, that’s what I thought… Let’s try getting a little closer.”
I moved quickly and quietly across the rugged landscape and took cover behind the shade of a large boulder.
This squadron proceeded on foot. Horses weren’t practical in Galia, the land being too rugged for them to keep a steady pace, and what’s more, there was no greenery for them to feed on. For holy knights and high-level adventurers, it was therefore much faster to travel the wastes on foot. In any case, holy knights mostly rode horses as an ostentatious display of rank.
Peering over the rock, I saw that the squadron was traveling at significant speed. Among them was one shining warrior clad in a holy knight’s white armor.
Wait, is that…?
“Greed, that’s Lady Roxy!” I exclaimed. “What is she doing here?!”
“Keep your voice down, idiot! They’ll hear you!”
Damn it, he’s right! I ducked back behind the rock. I’d spoken out of pure disbelief and surprise. My heart pounded. *What a clumsy slip-up… They didn’t hear anything, did they?*

After a short time, I peeked back out from behind the rock. The squadron still headed in the same direction, and with an unyielding urgency. Every soldier sprinted into the distance. I heaved a sigh of relief. If they discovered me, I'd once more be stuck trying to dodge Lady Roxy's inevitable barrage of questions. She'd probably run over to ask them herself!

I knew I had the skull mask, and that its minor enchantment concealed my identity, but still…the closer she got to me, the more concerned I grew that she would find out who I really was, about my Gluttony, and that I'd come to Galia to follow her.

"From what I've seen," said Greed, "when that girl is curious about something, and it tries to escape, she chases it down without mercy. Fate, if you keep getting all flustered and flighty whenever you see her, you'll lose."

"I don't get flustered! And what do you mean, flighty?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

"Just let it go, would you?" I muttered.

Still, I did know what Greed meant. When Lady Roxy wanted something, she pursued it with stubborn determination. On the surface, she was the daughter of a dignified family, and a refined and respectable holy knight. Having worked as one of her servants, though, I knew she was also the kind of girl who would drag me around to get or do what she wanted. Normally I wouldn't have minded, but it was troublesome at the moment, and I had no hope of changing her mind.

That same insistence had led Lady Roxy to bring me to Hart Manor, then the Hart family estate. She'd introduced me to all sorts of people I never would have met otherwise. Because of her, my world broadened. We'd laughed and smiled together, and those times comprised most of my few happy memories. I stared at Lady Roxy as she hurried into the dusty distance.

"However you slice it," I said, "we're heading in the same direction. I wonder if their journey has something to do with what Jade mentioned? How the duskstone supply diminished?"

"It's possible something happened in the canyon where they're gathered. So, what are you going to do about it?"

"You already know what I'm going to do."

If our destinations were the same, the answer was clear: we'd follow them. We just had to make sure we didn't get spotted.

Lady Roxy's squadron sprinted onward for several hours. I trailed behind, making sure to keep a set distance. They were a well-trained group, and strong. Still, even with their stats, they'd soon have to stop to rest. The sun began to set, and the surrounding crags grew dim. I looked up at the sky to see stars shining where, earlier, thick gray cloud cover had loomed.

"Good. We'll be able to orient ourselves more accurately than with some weird orc-compass," I said. "Do you know how to read the stars, Greed?"

“Of course I do. Who do you think you’re talking to? I’m the mighty black sword Greed. I can deduce our direction based on the positions of those three red stars and the blue star on the left!”
Everyone who lived in this world knew that much. It was common sense. Only Greed was bigheaded enough to boast about it.
“Hey, actually—over there in the western sky. What’s that star called?” I asked. “The golden one that shines so much brighter than the others?”
That star had appeared quite suddenly a few years ago. I often wondered whether it was my imagination, but over the years, it had almost seemed to grow bigger.
“That,” said Greed, “is Laplace.”
“Laplace?”
Laplace was a god, one worshipped in churches like the old shrine that had been converted into Babylon’s trading post. In the past, Laplace had enjoyed a large following. Since those days, however, the kingdom had torn down and built over many of Laplace’s churches. The number of their followers had only continued to drop. This was all to say that the kingdom hadn’t exactly banned worship of Laplace, but they seemed intent on suppressing the faith. They slowly washed away the deity’s name over the years, months, and days.
“Greed, do you believe in the existence of the gods?”
“The only thing I believe in is myself. But I’ll tell you what—as a token of my generosity, I’ll believe in you too.”
“A token of your generosity? Is that how much I mean to you?”
I wasn’t sure whether I should be flattered or insulted. Either way, it was just like Greed to say something like that. He’d lived longer than I could possibly imagine. Probably, the only way to stay sane over that amount of time was to be as entirely stubborn and self-confident as he was.
Laplace… The golden star shone in the night sky among the others, a color entirely of its own. That light seemed to send a message to all the creatures of this world: *“I am here.”*
“I occasionally look up at that star, and sometimes…” I said, putting a hand to my heart, “it scares me.”
Gluttony shivered inside me. It felt the same now too. As I looked up at that star, the bottomless hunger writhed in excitement.
“How funny,” said Greed. “It’s the same for me. Wherever we go, wherever we run, it is something we cannot escape.”
“What do you mean?”
Greed chuckled. “Don’t mind me.”
With that mysterious little remark, Greed dropped into silence. I placed the black sword on the ground and stared up at Laplace glimmering alone in the sky. My Gluttony buzzed within me, making my heart race painfully. It was nostalgia, a feeling I first encountered upon losing the village I once called home. A place I wanted to return to that I never could, and a place

where important memories remained… A place my feelings were continually drawn toward.
“Do you have someplace you want to go back to?” I asked.
The question was for my Gluttony, but of course it didn’t answer. What was I even doing, talking to my skill? I was being silly. Sentimental. Foolish, Greed would say.
I looked back toward the path ahead and saw that Lady Roxy’s troops had stopped to set up tents. They were finally ready to rest for the evening.

Chapter 13:
Scorched Earth and Salamanders

AFTER SETTING UP their camp for the night, Lady Roxy's squadron left about ten soldiers on watch around the tents. I thought about what to do now that her forces had paused their journey. I could always go ahead without them, but, well, I just didn't feel like continuing on alone. I decided to set up camp myself, so I looked around for a suitably rocky crag and plopped down, sheltered by its overhang.

Getting a good night's sleep in the heart of Galia was near impossible, so the best you could do was close your eyes, relax, and try to get a little rest. It was just like Myne and Greed had told me—adventurers always rest wherever and whenever they can, in preparation for the next battle. In some small way, that had become a habit of my own too. I dipped between half-asleep and half-awake as time passed into the dead of night, until a strange sensation shocked me awake.

What is that feeling?! I snatched Greed from the rock I'd propped him on.

"Greed, we've got monsters. And based on what I sense…"

"Yeah. No doubt about it. They're crowned beasts. More than one, too."

Two groups of crowned beasts approached in a pincer formation, closing in from the east and west. They weren't aiming for me, however. They honed in on the army encampment.

Lady Roxy felt the monsters' approach just like I did. She came flying out of her tent, armed and armored. She unsheathed her sword and issued orders to her troops.

I focused my mind, reaching out with my senses to follow the flow of the crowned beasts' presence. I needed to identify exactly how many enemies we were facing.

"There're four," I said. "Damn it. They're already surrounding the tents."

"What do you want to do, Fate?"

"We're going in!"

I dashed out from the cover of my crag and confirmed the trajectory of the incoming monsters with Night Vision.

Should I help with the monsters to the east or west?

Lady Roxy was in position with her troops on the western front. To the east, I saw a lone, unfortunately familiar, blond holy knight. There were more troops on the eastern front, but they also seemed less prepared. I looked once more at Lady Roxy to the west. She was more than ready. She'd be okay.

"Greed, we'll take the monsters to the east!"

"Transform me into the black bow!" Greed affirmed. "Take the initiative! Use Sandstorm!"

With the black bow in hand, I pulled the bowstring taut and nocked it with a magic arrow, which I infused with the spell Sandstorm. I launched the crackling sand arrow as I dashed toward the army's tents. It flew in a direct line at a giant, ashen lizard slithering in from the east.
The arrow bored into the monster's front right leg. Stone crept up the salamander's flesh from the wound, until the petrified leg could no longer bear the beast's momentum and snapped off with a resounding crack. The lizard lost its balance and plowed into the earth, rolling in clouds of dust.
"That slowed one down," I shouted. "Time to stop the other!"
I fired another magic arrow as I ran, but I no longer had surprise on my side. The remaining lizard whipped toward me. Its throat expanded, glowing hot, and gouts of fire spewed forth from its mouth. The blistering fire melted the very earth before it. The arrow I'd fired disintegrated in the flames.
"What the hell kind of fire is that?!" I yelped.
"Ah, I see," said Greed. "These are salamanders. When they inhale, they ignite the air within their oil sacs, where they store fire for attacks. But don't fret. They don't have any special skills, so you've only got their flames to worry about!"
The monsters were still outside the range of my Identify skill, so Greed's notes were eminently useful. I now knew the salamanders' fire would swallow any long-range attacks. To fell these beasts, I'd have to get in close and land a killing blow before I found myself engulfed in a burst of flame.
But first, I had to stop the salamander from crashing into Lady Roxy's camp. The blond holy knight—now closer, I saw he was indeed the irritating Northern Alistair—brought his sword up in a battle stance and charged the salamander. The beast was at least five times the size of an average human, but Northern nevertheless let out a fierce battle cry as he jumped in.
The salamander lashed out and sent Northern flying off behind the troops into one of the tents. The collapsed fabric showed no hint of further movement. That arrogant holy knight couldn't handle a single strike from a crowned beast. To think he'd been so haughty when we first met.
Without a leader, the troops under Northern fell into disarray. However, among the disorganized soldiers was a girl with short chestnut hair, swinging a greatsword that looked even bigger given her diminutive frame. She leapt in to attack the salamanders head-on, not a moment's indecision in her strikes.
"Her sword is wrapped in flame," I said. "Is it spell-imbued?!"
"Sure seems to be," said Greed. "Looks like a magical flamberge that stores elemental fire in its blade. A powerful weapon, but not against this particular enemy."
The girl's flamberge and the salamanders had the same elemental base. No matter how powerful her sword, its fiery strength was ineffective against these beasts. The girl brought the greatsword down from on high, but the salamander seized a small opening and swung its tail. The girl let out a cry

as the tail smashed her to the ground. Then the salamander turned back toward her, jaws wide and ready to bite.
“Hold on, Miria!”
The voice came from a scruffy middle-aged man readying a bow in the salamander’s blind spot. His perfectly aimed arrow plunged into the salamander’s eye. The man rushed in to whisk Miria to safety while the salamander shrieked, writhing in agony.
“Captain Mugan, behind you!” Miria shouted.
Mugan grunted. “This isn’t good…”
The salamander had turned back, its throat bulging with seams of fire. It was about to incinerate them, reducing the two brave soldiers to nothing more than flame and ash. There was despair in their cries as they braced for their deaths, but I was grateful. If they hadn’t fought so hard, I wouldn’t have arrived in time.
Just as the salamander was about to drown them in its billowing flames, I brought the black sword down and sliced the beast in half.

Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +900,000, Strength +1,530,000, Magic +830,000, Spirit +980,000, Agility +1,200,000.

The dead salamander burst into flames behind me. I had cut through the oil sacs in its throat, which set the beast alight.
“Are you okay?” I asked the soldiers. “Can you still fight?”
“Who the hell are you?!”
They really were experienced—they kept up their guard.
“We can get to know each other later,” I said. “There are another two salamanders to the west. If you can, you need to support the holy knight over there. I’ll take care of the remaining monster here.”
At this point, I was little more to them than a suspicious figure hidden behind a skull mask. All the same, Mugan took Miria and headed off to reinforce the troops fighting alongside Lady Roxy. From what I’d seen, they were both formidable warriors. With their support, I had faith that the battle to the west would be settled quickly and decisively.
I turned back to the east. Even without its front right leg, the remaining salamander dragged itself closer to the camp with a deadly determination. However, something was odd about the monster’s limping movements. A serious injury like this one usually drove a wild beast to retreat. The salamander, however, was persistent, heaving itself along, intent on attacking the kingdom’s army no matter how it suffered.
“I don’t know any monster that acts like this,” I said. “It has to know it’s going to die—but it’s like there’s some kind of distinct, malicious intent driving it forward.”
“Yeah. Something’s off. Even dimwitted wild monsters retreat instinctively when they recognize overwhelming danger,” Greed agreed.

I observed the beast more closely, careful not to allow it any opportunities to belch flames at me. What could drive it to ignore its own well-being?
“Look at the monster’s forehead,” I said. “Some kind of seal is branded on its skin.”
“I’ve never seen anything like that symbol before,” said Greed. “But it’s clearly not natural. It was deliberately inscribed.”
“Yeah.”
If Greed was right, and someone—or some*thing*—had placed that seal on these monsters, then there was no doubt a connection between this ambush and the marks. Still, without any obvious answer, we were hypothesizing, not acting. The more important task was taking care of the problem at hand—killing the salamander.
Before the beast could open its mouth to release any more fire, I slashed open its throat with the black sword.
Moments later, I heard a familiar metallic voice.

Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +900,000, Strength +1,530,000, Magic +830,000, Spirit +980,000, Agility +1,200,000.

The salamander’s stats were nothing spectacular, but this was still a feast of two crowned beasts, one right after the other. I clenched my teeth while, as expected, my Gluttony writhed in ecstasy.
Once I forced the skill’s eager spasms under control, the two soldiers I’d helped earlier returned to my position. It seemed the monsters on the west side had been dealt with.
The stocky older man stepped forward to speak first. “You saved us. I’m Captain Mugan, a commanding officer in Lady Roxy’s army.” Mugan gestured to himself, then to his fidgeting companion. “The rambunctious one here is Miria.”
“What did you call me?!” Miria shouted. “What kind of an introduction is that?! Rambunctious?! Honestly, you’re always so weird!”
“You have the gall to call me weird when *you* charged into a fight with a *fire* salamander with a *fire*-based weapon?!” Mugan snapped back. “Think before you act!”
“Now you’re being cruel! My flamberge is the only weapon I have!”
The two soldiers continued to bicker while the corpses of the salamanders smoldered behind us. I felt like I was watching a concerned father scold his unruly child. They were certainly the right ages. I watched silently, and Mugan suddenly seemed to remember he was in the middle of introductions.
“Oh, I, uh…I’m sorry.” Mugan scratched the back of his head. “Old habits, you know? Anyway, based on your appearance, I guess you must be Corpse, that adventurer everyone in Babylon is talking about.”
“You guessed right,” I said.

I worked out in the open now, so I had no reason to hide my identity—at least, not that one. Still, it took me a bit off guard to find my reputation had traveled as far as the Military Sector.
“I see. Then you really are as strong as the rumors say. It’s not easy slicing a crowned beast in half with a single strike. That kind of power is sure to pique Lady Roxy’s curiosity.”
“Huh? This guy is Corpse?!” said Miria, sidling closer to me. “No way! He’s really different than I imagined. I pictured more of the bigger, dirtier type. Hey, I want to see what you look like, so could you take off your mask, please?”
I considered backing away, but I suspected that might encourage her.
“Don’t be daft!” said Mugan, fortunately moving between me and the girl. “Really, Miria… Obviously, the whole reason he wears the mask is so people can’t see what he looks like! This adventurer just saved our lives, so be polite.”
Mugan pushed Miria’s prying face away as he apologized. The girl’s eyes filled with tears as she turned to the blonde young woman in white armor walking in our direction.
“Lady Roxy, Mugan is being so mean to me again! Would you believe what he said? He—”
“I’m sorry, Miria,” Lady Roxy said politely, “but this is very important. I’ll listen to your story later.”
“What? But, but—Lady Roxy! Please!”
Miria pleaded with Lady Roxy, but Mugan firmly grasped the back of her collar and dragged her toward the tents.
What a rowdy pair, I thought. Lady Roxy really has her work cut out for her.
With the two soldiers gone, the campsite was abruptly calm. It was hard to believe that mere moments ago, four crowned salamanders had attacked it.
“What a coincidence, seeing you here,” I said coolly.
“Indeed. Thank you for your help, Mr. Corpse. I never would’ve imagined that *four* crowned beasts could attack in such a coordinated manner. If you hadn’t shown up when you did, I fear many of my troops would now be dead.” She put her hand to her breastplate.
“Galia is the kind of place you can never underestimate,” I said. I knew she knew this, but I wanted to warn her of the dangers all the same.
“You’re absolutely right. This was a perfect example. As thanks, we’ve prepared a tent for you. You’re welcome to spend the night in it. After all, you’ve tailed us for quite some time now. I’m sure it’ll be more comfortable than sleeping on those bumpy rocks out there.”
I felt like my mask was going to fall off in shock. I forced my voice to stay even. “So…you noticed.”
“Of course. You tried not to leave any sign, but it was obvious.”
I heard Greed shouting, *“Fate! You idiot! You clueless, foolish amateur!”* through Telepathy, but I, personally, was at a loss for words.

“And you did…” Lady Roxy paused for a moment. “You *did* shout my name quite loudly when you first saw us. It would have been strange for me not to notice, no?”
I flushed, grateful yet again for the protection of my mask.
Lady Roxy laughed. It was like she was telling me that, for all my strengths, I’d still slipped up. In other words, they’d known I was following them from almost the moment I came across them and squeaked Lady Roxy’s name.
I couldn’t believe it.
“There’s no need to talk out here. The minor damage to the tents is likely repaired by now, so we can converse back in camp.”
“Very well.”
“Please be on your best behavior. That means no more running away, Mr. Corpse. After the last time, I swore I’d sit you down for a nice, long chat.”
It was just like Greed had said: running from Lady Roxy only pushed her to pursue her prey more doggedly. I supposed that if she was going to catch me anyway, tonight was about the best timing I could have asked for.
In the camp, we sat on two rocks, facing each other. Here, under the dark blanket of stars, our conversation picked up where it had left off.
“It’s gotten a bit cold, hasn’t it?” Lady Roxy observed. “We’d have started a fire, but there’s not a hint of firewood in Galia.”
“In that case,” I said, “we can use this.”
Even now, the salamanders’ bodies still burned in the distance, but they gave off the foul stench of oily rotten meat. We were better off avoiding them. Instead, I used my spell Fireball, which I’d learned from consuming the souls of gargoyles, to create a contained sphere of flame. I kept it hovering between Lady Roxy and myself.
“Oh, it’s so warm,” Lady Roxy said. “Thank you. You must have practiced a lot to keep such tidy control over the spell.”
“Some of us are fortunate to have been born with magic. The least I can do is learn to use it well.”
“You’re a much more diligent fellow than your appearance implies.”
For a time, Lady Roxy stared at my skull mask, but there was only so much of that I could take before speaking.
“It’s a little embarrassing to be stared at so…intently.”
“My apologies. It’s just, you remind me of somebody. How do I put it…? The way you talk, and your gestures, they’re like a mirror image of him. It’s like he’s right here by my side, even though he’s at the Hart family estate now. It’s a strange thing to say, I know, but…”
“Whoever he is, he must be very fortunate.”
My heart pounded in my chest, my breath caught in my throat. However magically this skull mask hid my identity, it couldn’t hide the gestures that were a natural part of my personality. Speaking face-to-face with Lady Roxy like this brought out the person I was under the mask.
To Lady Roxy, however, Fate Graphite was someone in need of protection. As far as she knew, he was safe working as a servant far to the north at the

Hart family estate. To her, that fragile boy could never reach a place like this. That knowledge reassured me. As long as I didn't remove my skull mask, I could remain beside her as the adventurer called Corpse.
Lady Roxy stared up at the night sky.
"Sometimes, I wonder if he's happy," she said. "He wasn't always a servant of the Hart family. I had my reasons for instating him in that position. I thought I was taking that step for him, for his sake, but now that we're apart like this, I wonder if it's really what he wanted."
"Anybody would be happy to have someone think of them so kindly," I said, "and I'm sure he's no different. I'd fight any person who complained about such a position."
"Thank you. I'm sorry to burden you with all this idle talk. It's late, so I'll get to the point. What do you want, Mr. Corpse? It's clear that your primary goal is not to tail my troops."
I had neither need nor reason to lie to her now that I'd come this far.
"The craftsman Jade Stratos asked me to gather duskstone," I said. "You can usually purchase it from the kingdom's army, but for some reason, it's no longer in stock. I'm supplying it to him instead."
"I see. Then our paths really have intersected," said Lady Roxy, looking at me with a new seriousness in her eyes. "We lost contact with the squadron that usually gathers materials in Galia, duskstone included. Their absence has led to significant supply problems for our armories and Babylon's craftsmen alike. My troops and I are headed this way both as potential support and to investigate what happened. Our goals are different, but our destination is the same. Shall we head there together?"
"Very well," I agreed. "We'll travel together until we reach the great canyon."
"Then it's decided. We're happy to have you on board."
Lady Roxy put out her hand. I clasped it in my own, careful not to engage my Telepathy as I did so. She was an honest person with an honest heart, and I didn't want to peek into it without her permission.
As we shook hands, that short girl with chestnut hair appeared. She dove in and grabbed Lady Roxy around the waist, pulling her away.
"Just how long do you intend to hold Lady Roxy's hand?!" the girl cried.

“Miria, enough,” said Lady Roxy.
“If you want to hold someone’s hand, you can hold mine. Here you go. Nice to meet you.”
The girl thrust her hand into my own, startling me, and my Telepathy kicked in before I could stop it.
“This skull-masked mystery man might be here to get close to Lady Roxy. He was obviously stalking us! I must protect my Lady Roxy! Don’t get on your high horse just because you’ve got high stats, lich-face skull-man. I’ve got my eye on you, and you’re the enemy! I won’t sleep a wink until I know what you’re up to!”
I couldn’t believe how different Miria was on the inside. She was deeply suspicious of me. She’d said “nice to meet you” with enthusiasm, but what she meant was “nice to meet my enemy.” I let a wry smile creep from behind my mask as I released her hand.
“Hm… You know, I’m still very curious about what’s behind that mask,” said Miria intently. “So curious, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep. Would you do me a favor and remove it?”
I had the feeling she wouldn’t be afraid of grabbing my mask right off my face. I needed to remain on guard. Lady Roxy quickly moved between the two of us, her expression troubled.
“Miria, that’s enough. You know you’re out of line,” she said sternly.
“But, Lady Roxy! Don’t you want to know what he looks like too?”
“I do, but…” Lady Roxy hesitated.
What?!
Even though Lady Roxy had stepped in to help, for a moment, I wasn’t sure I’d made the right decision—what might she do to get me to take off the mask?
Well, to be fair, I knew the impulse. Lady Roxy had wanted to understand the common folk of Seifort so badly that she’d disguised herself to venture out among them. She couldn’t fight her own curiosity. Still, she wasn’t the type to simply force her way into another person’s affairs.
I knew where she would land even before she spoke again. “You’re still out of line, Miria!”
“What?! But, Lady Roxy!”
“If you can’t listen to reason, you’ll have to listen to the person behind you!”
“Huh?”
Miria turned to find Captain Mugan standing behind her, his eyes narrowed, his forehead furrowed so tightly that veins pulsed at his temple.
“Ugh, Mugan,” Miria groaned. “I thought you were still doing the clean-up and investigation…”
“One of my soldiers wasn’t pulling her weight and vanished in the middle of duty, so I went to check up on her. Guess what I found?”
“I just wanted to make sure some creepy guy wasn’t pestering Lady Roxy!”
Did she just call me a creep? This girl just runs her mouth, huh?

Lady Roxy giggled. She put her hands together and bowed apologetically to me.
“Right, we’re off,” said Mugan.
“Mugan, wait!”
Mugan once again took hold of Miria’s collar and dragged her off. Miria called out for Lady Roxy even as they disappeared.
“Quite the handful,” I said.
“They’re always like that,” Lady Roxy replied. “Still, it’s nice that they’re so lively.”
“That’s one way of looking at it.”
Not that I distrusted them, but those two were the sort of people who made me glad to travel alone.
Lady Roxy nodded. “Well then, until tomorrow.”
“Until tomorrow.”
Our departure was set for early the following morning. I headed to the tent that Lady Roxy had designated as mine. Inside, I was surprised to see I was sharing it with Captain Mugan. I had never in my life imagined that I’d share space with a commanding officer. Even more surprising was the fact that I was also sharing with Miria, who currently lay on the ground with her hands and feet tied.
“What is she doing here?!” I yelped.
“No need to worry. If we don’t do this, she always runs off to bother Lady Roxy in the middle of the night. I know it’s unusual, but…” Mugan sighed. “This is kind of our routine now.”
“That’s, uh…that’s some routine.”
I ignored Miria’s bitter, piercing gaze, knowing that responding would only get her started again. Sleeping in the skull mask wasn’t particularly comfortable, but I didn’t have a choice. I made sure I was a comfortable distance from Miria and allowed myself to drift into a light sleep.
That night, not only did I have to be wary of the ravenous monsters stalking the Galian wilderness, I had to fear this enterprising girl trying to rip off my skull mask.

Chapter 14:
The Kingdom's Army

I AWOKE TO LIGHT streaming into the tent from outside, and I turned to see Miria's sleeping face trapped between Mugan's legs. From the look of it, she'd tried to pull something after I fell asleep, and Mugan had held her back. There was something silly and a little endearing about Miria in that moment, lost in slumber with a line of drool sliding down the side of her chin.

I rose from my bed and took the black sword Greed in hand. Mugan's eyes opened as I did.

"Sorry about last night," he said. "If we had a spare tent, we'd have put it up for you, but we only had time to bring the essentials for this mission."

"It still beats sleeping on the rocks," I said. Then, glancing over at the still-sleeping Miria, I added, "But more importantly, how did you sleep?"

"This? Oh, this happens all the time. She's a handful, all right, but she's also a trustworthy ally in battle. I hope to see her one day become Roxy's second in command, but until then, I've got to keep a close eye on her."

"You're practically family."

"Sometimes the troops say the same thing," Mugan replied with a laugh. "Don't let Miria hear you, though."

We left Miria to sleep and exited the tent. Outside, the troops had already started breakfast preparations. But nobody was making any food. The absence of water or firewood in Galia meant you couldn't really cook. Food was thus a simple affair. The troops passed out rations: dense brown bread, jerky, and dried fruit on wooden plates, as well as a cup of water. I'd brought the same sort of food.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to the tasteless meals out here," said Mugan. "All the same, do you want some?"

"I'll pass. Provisions are priceless in Galia, and I'm here uninvited. I'll eat from my own stock."

"I see… To be honest, I'm a bit relieved. I have a feeling your share would have come straight off Lady Roxy's plate. That's just who she is, for better or for worse."

The comment left an impression on me. I could see Mugan's pride in his commanding officer. Lady Roxy soon joined Mugan, myself, and the troops as we ate. Jokes and banter filled the air.

"Is Miria still sleeping?" Lady Roxy asked.

Mugan paused in his munching to answer. "She kept trying to escape and sneak into your tent, Lady Roxy. Eventually, she wore herself out."

"Oh, that girl…" Lady Roxy sighed. "I guess it can't be helped. I suppose I'll go wake her, then."

Lady Roxy put her unfinished breakfast down for a moment and walked over to Miria's tent. A short while later, we heard Miria's overjoyed voice, and when Lady Roxy returned, Miria was practically glued to her side.
"There is nothing better in this world than being woken by Lady Roxy! I can now officially, and happily, die without regrets!"
"Let's avoid any comments about untimely deaths out here, Miria," Mugan said.
I sympathized with Mugan's sentiment. We really had no idea what waited for us out there in the great canyon.
"Good morning, Mugan," said Miria, pumping her fist to the sky, "and good morning, troops! Let's make today a great one!"
"Did you even hear me, Miria?" said Mugan, exasperated. The slump of his shoulders seemed to indicate that he knew he was in for another long, busy day.
Lady Roxy and I glanced at each other and chuckled.
Northern arrived soon after and sat close by my side. His right arm was wrapped in bandages due to the injuries he'd suffered last night. The salamander's attack had sent him flying. Even with his arm in a sling, cocky Northern still grinned as though the whole world was his delicious oyster. His smug attitude was in clear contrast to Lady Roxy's camaraderie with her troops.
"Ah, so we meet again, Corpse," Northern said. "Thanks for your help yesterday."
"You're supposed to be a holy knight," I said. "Your tactics were beyond careless."
"When you put it that way, yes, I've really got no excuses. It was me versus two crowned beasts, and I acted in haste. As you can see, I'll be fairly useless in battle with this injury, so it's nice you're here to take my place. At least every cloud has a silver lining, right?"
"Your silver lining lasts until we get to the great canyon, so your arm better heal up by then."
"I'll be fine," said Northern, his smile widening. "By the way, have you put any further thought into becoming one of my men?"
It was impressively arrogant for Northern to ask as much after a single salamander had blasted him through the air. This was the famous overconfidence of Seifort's holy knights. My answer remained unchanged.
"I have no intention of working under you," I said. "No matter what happens."
"Such a pity. And I had such high hopes for you…"
Northern had barely touched his food, but he stood up and left. His clique, who I'd barely noticed, followed him close behind. Despite myself, I was increasingly curious about this holy knight. I turned to Lady Roxy, now quietly eating her breakfast.
"Lady Roxy, may I ask you something?"
"What is it?"

“What sort of person is Northern?”
“Northern Alistair…hm. He’s a member of a family of holy knights who have protected Babylon from monsters for a long, long time. He knows Galia like the back of his hand, and he’s taught me a lot. He was the first to realize the gathering expedition had been delayed, and we came to investigate on his recommendation.”
It seemed Lady Roxy put a lot of trust in Northern. This was her first time in Galia, after all.
“He’s not the type to talk about himself too often,” she went on, “which makes it easy for people to get the wrong idea about him. He’s similar to you, in that respect.”
“Huh?! Me and *Northern* are similar?”
“Well, you’re both full of secrets.”
I couldn’t argue there. I looked over at Northern and his men as they prepared. Northern gave the orders while his men quickly folded down tents and stowed them in rucksacks.
The two of us are similar…?
Despite Lady Roxy’s praise, something about Northern’s aloof mysteriousness chafed at me.
After breakfast, Lady Roxy and her squadron proceeded farther south. I went with the group. Miria somehow had the energy to keep up her antics for the entire journey. However, because the only thing around us was the endless rugged landscape of Galia, I was a little glad for the distraction.
“I’ll take that skull mask, thank you very much!” Miria cried, grunting as she reached out to yank it off my face. Really, she made the otherwise-dull march feel a bit like sparring.
“I don’t think so,” I said, dodging away. “You’ll have to do better than that if you really want it!”
She was quite the spirited girl. Even as we rushed toward our destination, she bounded left, right, up, and around as she looked for any angle from which to take my mask. Still, she never got close, and I evaded her attempts with ease. Her movements were simple, and I followed her feet to know where she was going.
“Damn it! How are you evading me so easily?!” she cried, winded.
“That’s a trade secret. If I told you, I’d only make life harder for myself.”
“What?! But I’m trying so hard! How dare you!”
Miria’s rage lent her speed, and I feared she’d be an exhausted mess by the time we made it to the great canyon. Luckily, before that could happen, Lady Roxy interceded.
“Miria, that’s enough. If you don’t show some self-control, I’ll show you what I’m like when I’m angry. And, Mr. Corpse, please don’t encourage her!”
Miria and I were both to blame. Our voices rang out in unison: “Sorry!”
Mugan and the other soldiers laughed, their cheer echoing across the jagged lands. It struck me that, just like that, I’d become a member of Lady

Roxy's crew. I felt the same warm camaraderie that I'd felt as a servant for the Hart family.

Those feelings were extinguished by Northern, who arrived with a report a few hours into the march, just after we took out an orc squadron.

"That canyon over there," he said, gesturing into the distance. "That's our destination."

At the rocky end of the ruined lands, just over the horizon, a massive crevice gaped. It looked nothing like a natural formation—it was more like some immense strike of guided power had gouged into the earth. I couldn't imagine what could possibly have resulted in such wide-scale destruction.

Not until I remembered Greed's Second Level secret technique—the Bloody Ptarmigan, the apocalyptic black bow. Perhaps a maxed-out version of that attack, fed with more stats…

"Hey, Greed," I muttered. "You didn't make that canyon, did you? Sometime in the past, with some kind of horrendously powerful attack?"

"I couldn't tell you," the sword said. "I can't remember everything from that far back."

"I had a feeling you'd say something like that."

Whether or not Greed remembered everything he'd ever done, he hadn't said that the canyon *wasn't* his doing either. I wondered about the bearer of Gluttony who had come before me, and what they had accomplished together with the black sword. Perhaps this canyon offered the tiniest glimpse into that history. That put a thrill in my step. If this place contained secrets of the past, I wanted to see it as soon as I could. As I split off from Lady Roxy's squadron, she called out to me.

"Mr. Corpse!"

"We're almost there," I replied. "This is as far as we go together."

"I suppose it is. But when you finish gathering the material you're after, let's regroup."

Her eyes did not shift in their scrutiny of me. *We came this far together, so we'll return to Babylon together,* her shining gaze seemed to say.

"Very well." I resigned myself to our new plans. "When I've found what I'm looking for, we'll regroup."

"Very good. Be careful out there, please."

As Lady Roxy watched me part ways with her squadron, Miria suddenly popped out from behind her.

"Corpse! You better prepare yourself! When we head home, I'm taking that mask from you!"

Captain Mugan stepped out from the troops and scooped up Miria to carry her off. "That's enough out of you, Miria!"

I hoped that the next time we met, that girl might be a little less excitable.

I headed toward the east side of the great canyon, following the sheer cliffs. Lady Roxy and her troops went in the opposite direction, toward the west, where the missing expedition had planned to build their base of operations. I'd join Lady Roxy there once I finished my own business.

The question now was where to look for the duskstone. According to Jade, the colorless, transparent crystals let off faint purple light. That gave me a mental image of an ominous, cursed aura of crackling indigo, but I had no way to know what the crystals actually looked like until I saw them myself.
As I got closer to the great canyon, the sheer size of it overwhelmed me. This jagged gash shorn into the earth could easily have fit a hundred Babylons. It might take quite some time to find the duskstone I needed. I couldn't imagine it would be any easier for Lady Roxy to find her missing troops. In that case, if I stumbled across them before she did, I'd have to take a quick detour to inform her.
Aside from its scale, what really surprised me about the canyon was the greenery. Great trees lush with green leaves reached up from the foot of sheer cliff faces, their leaves rustling in the occasional gust of wind. Fields of grass made the canyon look like a paradise somehow distinct from the land of death we knew as Galia.
My first step into the gorge only made that thought more real. The bloody, putrid reek of Galia dissipated. Instead, my lungs filled with clean air.
"It's like this is the only pure place in Galia," I said.
"Yeah," answered Greed, "It's in Galia, but it's different from Galia."
"Is it possible this greenery is all a result of the battle that created the canyon?"
"Perhaps."
"I just knew you'd be vague about it!"
Was it possible the last bearer of Gluttony had wielded such power they had cleansed a part of the land or something? If so, I was nowhere near matching the strength they'd possessed. I walked through the grassy fields for a time, until I reached a sheltered meadow spotted with hundreds of unusual boulders. Trees and grass grew around and through them, as if the boulders served as sustenance. Boulders that looked like…
I stopped.
"These…these boulders are *monsters*."
"Monsters turned to stone, it would seem," said Greed. "It seems to me they've been here for many long years, trapped as they were, never returning to the earth."
"It's a graveyard."

Chapter 15:
The Canyon of Green

THE PETRIFIED MONSTERS surrounding us were of all types and sizes. Some could have been crowned beasts, hundreds were orcs, and a number were their lesser cousins, goblins.

"Greed, look at that." I nodded ahead at a much fresher sight.

"Those are…huh. They're still alive."

Some distance into the meadow, a group of orcs lay broken and writhing, their arms and legs twisted in unpleasant directions. All frothed at the mouth, mortally wounded, lingering on the verge of death. I looked up and estimated the drop from the cliff edge above to be well over a thousand feet. Had the orcs fallen from all the way up there?

"I wonder if some other monster coerced them into doing this," I said. "There have to be fifty—maybe more. Why else would so many orcs just fall off a cliff together at the same time?"

"Coercion, you say…" muttered Greed. "Well, there's no evidence either way, at least not on the surface. Maybe they charged and missed their mark."

It was true that, again, I was just hypothesizing. As I once more studied the peaceful meadow, I identified a few more clusters of dying monsters turning to stone. A larger quantity had petrified already. What unsettled me most was that, even while bleeding out from shattered limbs, none of the orcs displayed any pain. Rather, they looked blissful as they awaited their demise.

A field that leads captured monsters to their final rest…

I kept the dying orcs in my peripheral vision as I walked by them and deeper into the great canyon. Nowhere in this field of once-living boulders did I detect a hint of the indigo duskstone crystals I was searching for.

"They're not here. Are those crystals really somewhere in this canyon?"

"They must be. The kingdom's troops gathered them here until recently. If you keep exploring, they'll have to show up eventually."

The canyon was vast, not just towering but long—long enough to be an entire valley. I probably should have asked Northern about the duskstone earlier, while I'd had the chance. On the other hand, I had a gut feeling that the less time I spent with him the better. I'd just have to work things out on my own. I'd had this dumb idea that I'd just waltz in, and the duskstone would be sitting in plain view, waiting for me, but the reality proved quite different.

Those crystals have to be here somewhere, I thought. Are they? Over there, maybe?

I looked all over, up and down, until finally I noticed a bright sparkle along the cliff face.

Well, well, well, what have we here? It had to be my prize. How many shiny rocks could one canyon hide?
I climbed up close and pried the ore from the cliff. Upon closer inspection, it was golden in hue, about the size of my fist. Definitely not the slightest bit purple.
“Damn it. This isn’t what we’re looking for.”
I was about to throw the ore away when Greed shrieked in my head. “Don’t throw that away, idiot! That’s orichalcum! You don’t have any idea what that’s worth, do you?!”
“This is orichalcum?!” I stared at the palm-sized metal chunk in my hand.
“You don’t have to take my word for it. Use Identify!”
Greed was much more serious and earnest than usual, so I Identified the ore immediately.

Orichalcum: A rare and sacred ore. When used as a crafting material, it bestows holy protection upon armaments and equipment.

Whoa! This is the real deal!
“If I sell this, how much are we looking at?”
“Most orichalcum ore is no larger than a bean when it’s gathered. With a piece of ore the size of a fist, you could build several mansions.”
“Well, let’s bring it back with us. I wonder if there’s any more around here…”
Talk about hitting the jackpot! This was almost as good as the crystals. I continued walking along the eastern side of the cliff, looking for more orichalcum. As luck would have it, I managed to pry out another two pieces about the same size.
“With these, it doesn’t even matter how expensive things are in Babylon. We’re living on easy street!”
“Better watch out for that landlady, though. She’s been squeezing money out of you since day one. If she gets a glimpse of those stones, you can expect even better service, and higher prices to match.”
“Well, the service at that inn is already easily as good as any of the high-class ones, so… Honestly, I’d love to see what those higher levels of service look like.”
“You say that now, but I can already picture her charging you twenty gold coins per night!” Greed burst into raucous laughter.
The going rate for the high-class inns of Babylon was about five coins per night. I couldn’t help but wonder what kind of service you could get for four times that amount. Back when I was a gatekeeper, it’d taken five long years of grueling work to earn two silver coins. When you factored in the fact that a single gold coin was equal to a *hundred* silver, twenty gold per night was an extraordinary expense.

My perception of the value of money had really shifted since I reached Babylon. It was about time I started thinking a little more about how I budgeted.
“Anyway, I didn’t know orichalcum came from Galia,” I said. “This is the material they use to forge holy swords, right?”
“Almost all the material used to craft special equipment comes from Galia. It’s a unique environment, conducive to forming such things.”
“Like duskstone?”
“Indeed. But first things first: Get out there and find them!”
“We haven’t had any luck so far. If you’ve got tips, now’s the time.”
“Always need your sword to bail you out, huh? Fine, fine. Give me a minute.”
Greed dropped into silence, concentrating. Was that all he needed to do? We could have saved ourselves a lot of time if he’d just said so from the start! Still, nosing around had led us to the orichalcum, so maybe he just enjoyed the exploration.
Greed piped up. “I can feel it, Fate! Those gems are a ways south from here.”
“South, huh? All right, I’m on it!”
The southern stretch of the canyon brought us to a path sloping downward. The farther we went, the more stone monsters we found. So many were piled on top of each other that I couldn’t even see the ground beneath their bodies. To continue farther south, I had to walk over them.
“This is unsettling,” I said.
“‘Unsettling,’ says the guy who fills his rumbling stomach by slurping down monster souls.”
“Hey, that’s one thing, this is another. They’re totally different! And anyway, you know the saying. Waste not, want not.”
We continued on for a time.
“Those crystals are around here somewhere,” said Greed.
“But where?”
I scanned the area and spotted a crumbling cliffside. What I saw there snatched the breath from my lungs.
From within the stone, a face peered out, connected to a rusted, metallic body crudely forged from a collection of other monsters’ bodies.
It was a chimera, much like the one I had fought alongside Myne—a fight where I had nearly lost my life. I unsheathed my sword and readied myself in a battle stance.
“Is it moving?” I asked.
“Nah. This one is completely shut down,” said Greed. “You can tell. Look at its chest.”
“Ah… It’s got no core.”
When I fought the barrier chimera, Haniel, it had moved because a young girl of pure white had been the monster’s core—the same girl who had appeared later in my dreams. With Myne’s help, I’d devoured Haniel’s soul,

destroying it completely. If this chimera had an empty core, it was soulless, and it couldn't move. It was also smaller than Haniel, which made me curious. I used Identify on it.

Chimera, Lv 1
Vitality: 6,300,000
Strength: 5,400,000
Magic: 4,700,000
Spirit: 2,300,000
Agility: 2,000,000
Skills: ERROR

Interesting, I thought. Even though it's shut down, I can still analyze its stats.
This chimera didn't have a unique name like Haniel. Perhaps that meant it was a standard variety, not a specialized type like Eris had told me about. It still resembled Haniel in that they were both Level 1, and its skills showed up only as "ERROR." Myne had explained that, hadn't she? If I recalled correctly, chimeras were constructed artificially, crafted from different monsters fused into one unnatural creature, making their skills unstable and thus unreadable. Even if I killed a chimera and devoured it with Gluttony, I wouldn't gain any of its skills.
Notably, while this chimera had stats as high as six million, it was on the weak side compared to Haniel. That said, I looked at these beasts from the point of view of someone with a Skill of Mortal Sin. If any ordinary adventurer met a chimera of this level, that adventurer would soon after meet their maker. This basic chimera would be a handful even for a holy knight.
"What is this thing doing here?" I asked Greed as I gazed at the empty shell.
"Pretty sure this is an experimental model. Almost all of those were buried in battles long ago. It looks like the rocks that covered this one recently crumbled to reveal it."
I stepped closer to get a better look at the half-buried chimera. As I did so, my gaze was drawn southward, to another part of the canyon where the rocks crumbled away. The way the stone had fractured gave me a bad feeling. It looked as though something huge had crawled out of the cliff face, then headed west. When I examined the path smashed through the stone monsters, I feared I knew what had happened. An experimental chimera had awakened and attacked the kingdom's soldiers here.
No… Based on the tracks, I wasn't looking for one chimera—I was looking for three.
"Guess we'll have to put off our duskstone hunt for the time being," I said.
"You're going to search for them?"
"Of course I am!"

I’d left Lady Roxy with her troops because I knew she could handle herself against the likes of a few crowned beasts. A chimera—*three* chimeras—changed the situation. Even one weaker than Haniel still had more than enough in raw stats to give Lady Roxy trouble, let alone what havoc it could wreak with its unpredictable mess of skills.

I dashed off. Just as I set foot in the peaceful fields, a great explosion erupted to the west. I charged forward without hesitation, and soon the carnage came into focus between the trees.

Three activated chimeras surrounded Lady Roxy, Captain Mugan, Miria, and their troops. Mugan’s arm was bloody, and he lay unconscious. Another ten wounded soldiers had fallen to the ground. The chimeras’ attack had taken them by surprise. Only Lady Roxy and Miria were still able to move and fight.

And where was Northern?! Had that smug jerk used his injured arm as an excuse to slack off somewhere? Well, even if so, the clamor of battle echoed through the great canyon. He would hear it, and when he did, he would come—but at this moment, I sensed no sign of him, nor of reinforcements. It was up to me.

Chapter 16:
The Second Coming of the Chimeras

I DOVE THROUGH the grassy fields and into battle, cutting off one chimera's leg as I did. I slid to a halt by Lady Roxy's side.
"Are you okay?" I asked.
She looked relieved to see me, and she quickly brought me up to speed. "Yes, somehow. But these monsters took us completely by surprise. I've never seen anything like them. Mugan suffered an injury protecting Miria, and the beasts' coordinated ambush caught the other soldiers."
Even if she and Miria wanted to prioritize getting the injured troops to safety, they couldn't run. Not while surrounded by three chimeras. However, by striking decisively and cutting off one chimera's leg while I moved in, I'd also given us a little space to breathe. Luckily, it looked like these particular chimeras didn't share Haniel's speedy regeneration abilities.
The now three-legged chimera could no longer support its own weight. It staggered clumsily, attempting to regain balance. Blood bubbled from the monster's wound as the stump blackened. The grotesque creature *was* repairing itself, but at this rate, it would take at least a week to form anything remotely functional.
"These abominations are called chimeras," I told Lady Roxy. "You have to take out the core. That's where they're weak."
"The core?"
"You see those orcs wired into their chests? The orcs power the chimeras' souls. If you kill the core, you kill the chimera."
Honestly, I was surprised to see ordinary monsters in chimera cores. Haniel had used a human, which I'd assumed necessary. Yet here in front of me, two cores clearly held normal grunt orcs, while the third held a blue-skinned high orc.
"I'm thinking, Fate," said Greed. "Are we supposed to believe that rockface just so happened to crumble and uncover these empty chimeras, and lost orcs just so happened to wander into their empty cores? And that just so happened to all three chimeras at the same time?"
"Yeah. I don't like the sound of that either," I said, "but we can question the details *after* we take care of the problem."
First, we had to get the wounded soldiers to safety. I wouldn't be able to fight freely with them in the way.
"Lady Roxy, can you fight?"
"I'm ready," Lady Roxy declared. "Miria, are you good?"
"I'm on it," Miria said. Even her excitable tone darkened in the face of this threat.

The two of them were seasoned warriors. They read my intentions in my movements. We no longer needed to speak. I gripped the hilt of the black sword and moved in on the crippled chimera. It summoned a ring of fire around itself to stop me. At a glance, I knew my Fire Resistance would handle these flames; the chimera had only summoned ordinary fire, not the magical variety.

I burst through the blazing wall and lifted my sword high to strike the chimera's core. The beast shielded itself with its arms, and I used this opening to take aim at my *real* target—the chimera's other front leg. I sheared the limb right off.

The chimera pitched forward, and its flames dissolved. In the next instant, Lady Roxy leapt into the fray, and with one powerful blow, she severed the head of the orc entangled at the monster's core. Its core destroyed, the chimera fell silent, unmoving.

Two chimeras remained. I had an eye on them, but I hurried to Miria, who had kept both full-strength chimeras busy while Lady Roxy and I finished off the weakened one.

"Hurry up!" Miria howled, darting around the field. "Ugh… I'm so dead, I'm so dead!"

She was exaggerating. Her evasive movements were truly impressive, and her use of the flamberge was nothing short of masterful. Because her blade was imbued with the same elemental flame as the chimera's fireballs, she was able to cut them down before the fire so much as singed her. I wondered whether this technique was something she'd picked up in the previous battle with the salamanders. If so, she learned fast.

Miria might have been all sorts of crazy off the battlefield, but on it, she flared with wild potential. Still, no matter what I could learn from studying her maneuvers, I didn't have the time. I had to move.

"Miria, you're clear!" I shouted. "Get the wounded to safety!"

"Ugh, you're the last person I ever wanted to save me, lich-man skull-face! I'll never forgive myself! Anyway, thank you!"

"Think nothing of it. But, please, look after Mugan."

"Leave it to me!" Miria said, and then, "Oh, Lady Roxy!"

"Miria, I need you to get Captain Mugan and the other soldiers to safety," said Lady Roxy. "Mr. Corpse and I will take care of the remaining chimeras. Once you're clear, regroup with Northern and his men, and inform them of what happened."

"Understood. Be careful, Lady Roxy."

The girl was clearly reluctant to leave Lady Roxy's side, but she did as she was told. She shouted orders to the soldiers who were still mobile, and together they carried the wounded to safety. Just a bit longer, and I'd be able to fight freely.

"We take down the others like we took down the first," I said, nodding toward Lady Roxy.

"Got it."

We readied ourselves for another round, then dashed toward the chimera with an ordinary orc at its core. The high orc chimera cast a roaring firewall in our way, the flames far more intense than those the chimera we'd cut down had produced.

I transformed Greed into the black scythe and sliced the fire into nothing. The momentum carried me into a second strike that neatly separated the grunt-chimera's front legs from its body in a spray of corroded fluid. Lady Roxy once again leapt in to finish off the staggering abomination.

Meanwhile, I turned to face the remaining high orc chimera. My job was to stop it from getting in Lady Roxy's way.

As I expected, the monster tried to throw another wall of fire in her path, but I sliced the flame away with the skill-negating power of the black scythe. At the same time, Lady Roxy chopped off the head of the grunt in the chimera's core, spattering its bright blood across the charred grass.

Now, we had only one chimera left to deal with.

It was strange, but even though it was our first time fighting together, Lady Roxy and I moved as though we already knew each other's maneuvers. I'd fought alongside Lord Aaron Barbatos and Myne, the bearer of Wrath, but fighting beside Lady Roxy felt the most natural. She clearly felt it too, because in the beat after the grunt-chimera collapsed, she looked at me with surprise on her face.

"One left," I said.

"Let's keep up the pace and make it quick. I need to check on my troops."

"Are you okay? Your breath is a little short."

"I'll be fine. You gave me the last strike on each of those last two chimeras, and I've never taken in so many Spheres before. Thanks to you, I've leveled up multiple times."

"Glad to hear it," I said sincerely.

Lady Roxy put on a brave face, but she was confronting an enemy with stats well above her own. If she wanted to save her troops, this fight had no room for error. We had to finish the strongest chimera, and fast.

I dashed toward the last chimera with Lady Roxy close behind. The monster threw firewalls in our way, but again, before the skill-canceling blade of the black scythe, these spells were useless. I cut the fires away as we ran, once again aiming to slice off the monster's legs.

But the high orc chimera wasn't stupid. It didn't let me use the same trick a third time. The firewalls were a distraction. The monster leapt backward, metal body gleaming, in an arc nearly thirty feet above the ground. Its landing point, however, was obvious.

"We attack the moment it lands," I said. Lady Roxy didn't even need to acknowledge my direction. We moved in unison.

If we timed it right, and I knew we would, the chimera didn't stand a chance of avoiding our joint attack. We sprinted to the site of impact, ready for our chance to finish it off.

We could not have predicted what happened next.

As the chimera landed, the creature's immense weight crushed through the ground we stood on. Together, our voices cried out in shock as Lady Roxy and I plummeted into cavernous darkness below.

I engaged Night Vision as we fell, trying to get a sense of how far we were falling, but I couldn't see the bottom. It was so deep. The landing was going to be bad. I grabbed Lady Roxy's hand and pulled her close.

"Huh?"

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm stronger than I look."

Lady Roxy didn't reply. She simply let me carry her as we fell. A tremendous shock snapped through my back. *We hit bottom*, I thought, but there were no thoughts after that, and my consciousness faded out somewhere far, far away.

Chapter 17:
At the Bottom of the Cavern

I DIDN'T KNOW how much time passed, but when I woke, I could only hear Greed shouting.
"Hey! Fate! Hey, wake up!"
"Greed…? Ah! Ow. Did you hear that pop? I think my ribs might be fractured. Lady Roxy…looks unharmed, thankfully."
Lady Roxy lay on top of me, unconscious, but whole and breathing. Slowly, hazily, she opened her eyes.
"Fay?" she whispered.
That one word had me scrambling for my skull mask, which had slipped from my face in the fall.
Where is it?!
I looked around hastily and found the thing had fallen by my side. At least it was still in one piece. I scooped it up with my left hand and quickly fastened it back over my face.
It might be too late already. I'll have to make something up to put her off my scent. Well, it's dark, so…
However, when I looked back at Lady Roxy, her eyes were once again closed, and she'd fallen back into unconsciousness. I carefully slipped out from beneath her and laid my jacket under her head as a makeshift pillow.
About thirty minutes later, she woke up fully.
"Are you all right?" I asked.
Her answer came slowly. It was taking a little time for her senses to fully return. "Yes. I'm sorry about earlier, but thanks to you, I'm fine and ready to go. Ouch!"
Lady Roxy tried jumping to her feet to show me she was uninjured, but she lost her balance. Her left leg was causing her the pain.
"You're not fine at all. Here, lean on my shoulder."
"I'm…I'm sorry." She let herself lean on me, but her face spoke only apologies.
Lady Roxy was horrible at hiding things, so I knew if something had changed in how she thought of me, her feelings would show in her reactions. Fortunately, I didn't detect anything different. She'd probably written off seeing my true face as a dream. After all, on the way, she'd said I reminded her of someone she knew…that someone being the real me, Fate. She could readily assume she'd been disoriented.
For now, we had two things to worry about: how to get out of this place, and what had happened to the surviving chimera.
"You don't need to apologize," I said. "I'm helping you because I want to."
"Thank you. I'm glad."

“We better get away from this area. I think the chimera might have fallen with us.”
Lady Roxy was in no shape to fight again. I needed to get her somewhere safe. Using my Night Vision, I examined the cavern into which we’d fallen. There were monsters in here too, albeit of the aged, petrified-boulder variety. How long had monsters been piling up in this canyon?
However, the monsters down here were like none I had ever seen. Huge beasts with seven heads, others with countless spindly legs, and some with coiled tails like snakes… They looked far more massive and ferocious than the creatures roaming the kingdom these days.
Lady Roxy was also shocked. “I’ve never seen monsters quite like these.”
“Perhaps they roamed the world long ago.”
“The monsters that attacked us earlier, the ones you called chimeras… Are those ancient as well?”
“Yes. The chimeras were created some four thousand years ago, when Galia was still prosperous. They had the technological means to manufacture them by combining multiple lesser beasts.”
“Who told you this?” Lady Roxy asked.
“A Galian survivor.”
Lady Roxy fell silent for a while, lost in thought. “That Galian, was she a young girl wielding a large, black axe?”
“That’s her, yes…”
“I thought it might be. I saw her once before, on my family’s estate. After that, I was rather curious about her, so I tried to investigate her identity and where she came from. What I found was shocking.”
“And…what did you find?” I asked hesitantly.
That quietly conceited Myne. There had to be all sorts of legends and urban myths following her around, both good and bad.
“I thought it was absurd, but from everything I’ve gathered, she doesn’t age!” Lady Roxy said excitedly. “Can you believe it? I met an old knight who claimed to have seen her some fifty years ago. Do you know what he told me? He said he’d seen her again recently at the supply town near Babylon, and she didn’t look like she’d aged a single day!”
Oh, wow, I thought. That must have been around the time that I was still traveling with her!
“That old man *also* said she was traveling with a young man wearing a skull mask,” Lady Roxy said, staring pointedly at me.
“Hey, hey, now,” I said, “don’t look at me like that. I’m obviously not hiding that it was me, okay? I was the one traveling with her.”
Lady Roxy wouldn’t usually be so persistent about digging into a person’s personal life, but it was clear she was desperately interested in Myne and anyone who might know something about her. Her inquisitive impulse was impressive, especially considering we’d just fallen into a dark cavern and been separated from all chance of assistance. It didn’t help that I was weak to that sparkle in Lady Roxy’s eyes, either.

“I know it’s rude to pry, but will you answer two questions?” she asked.
“Depending on what those questions are, sure.”
“First, then: is she very strong?”
“Yes. Leagues stronger than I am, no doubt about it. Actually, it’s probably safe to say that she’s far *too* strong.”
“I see. Okay, second: how long has she been alive?”
I wasn’t sure how to answer this particular question. Then, I remembered Myne herself had told Aaron her true age without a hint of hesitation. If she wasn’t hiding it, I didn’t see any harm in sharing.
“From what I’ve been told, she’s lived for around four thousand years.”
“Eh?! That long? She must be a walking encyclopedia of Galia! I would just love to sit down and chat with her the next time we meet.” If Lady Roxy had been inquisitive before, now she overflowed with enthusiasm.
“She’s not really the friendly chat type,” I said. “She swings her axe and sends monsters flying, hoards money that she can’t ever seem to get enough of, and steals people’s food when she’s hungry. She’s a never-ending storm of bad habits. That’s what traveling with her is like.”
“Really? When I saw her at the estate, there was an aura of, oh, I don’t know, cool cuteness to her, if that makes sense.”
Cool cuteness… Well, there was that hidden side of Myne, to be sure, even though she was stronger than a demon. Though Lady Roxy had seen Myne for only a few moments, she’d studied the girl carefully.
“She has business here in Galia, so she’s around the place somewhere,” I said, “but when that’s done with, and she comes back, I can try mentioning that you’d like to meet her.”
“Thank you! I look forward to it!”
“Maybe don’t get too excited yet. She hasn’t actually said yes or no.”
“But that’s fine, isn’t it? Isn’t it fun to look forward to what might happen in the future?”
Hm… I guess it is. I was always impressed by Lady Roxy’s penchant for optimism.
We walked for quite some time after that, and eventually we found a place where it seemed safe to rest.
“Let’s take a break,” I said, slowing down. “Once your leg heals, we’ll find a way out of here.”
“Good idea. Thank you for carrying my weight all this way.”
Lady Roxy plopped down on the ground where we’d stopped. With her holy knight stats, it would take no more than an hour for her to fully heal. Meanwhile, thanks to my Health Regen, my fractured ribs had already put themselves back together.
“Why don’t you sit down, Mr. Corpse? I’m sure you took more damage from that fall than I did.”
“I have the Health Regen skill, so most minor injuries don’t bother me. I’ll keep watch, you just rest.”

“You have Health Regen?! I’m rather jealous… It’s quite the rare skill. Actually, you’re the first person I’ve met with it. How is it? Can you just keep moving all the time? Do you still need sleep?”
“Well, it heals physical damage, but not mental exhaustion. So, I do still need to sleep.”
“You know, the goblin king that roams the woods near the capital of Seifort has Health Regen. Apparently, because of that skill, it can walk the forests at night without rest.”
Lady Roxy spoke with an air of expertise as she rubbed her injured leg. I’d devoured that goblin king and made its skill my own, but I couldn’t tell her that. I had to act as though I’d been born with the skill.
“Corpse, have you ever been to the capital?”
If I wanted to be honest, I needed to tell her that I had. I *didn’t* want to tell her I’d left the city and headed to Galia in pursuit of her. I wasn’t sure if I should avoid this conversation or lie again. I couldn’t know what topics might come up, and whether I’d slip up on any of them. Although it was probably fine to fudge a little.
“Yeah, I’ve been to Seifort,” I said cautiously.
“Ah, so you have! In that case, do you know of a tavern in the Merchant District? The one called Encounter? It’s a bit cramped, but it’s got such a lovely warmth!”
Uh… Now she was talking about the very tavern *I’d* taken her to, back on our one excursion. I nodded tentatively.
Lady Roxy went on happily. “Really?! I’d walked by it a few times, but it wasn’t the kind of place I felt comfortable going to by myself… Anyway, a good friend of mine took me there. Oh, we had such a wonderful time.”
“Their fish dishes are exquisite.”
“Yes, they really are, aren’t they? I’d like to eat there again when I return to Seifort.”
“Then first things first. Let’s find a way out of this place.”
I looked up to where we’d fallen, happy beneath my skull mask. It stirred something in my heart to hear Lady Roxy say she wanted to go back to the tavern we’d visited together. Lady Roxy gave me a bright smile and rose to her feet.
“Yes, you’re right. And my leg has gotten much better. Look,” she said.
It had almost entirely healed. Lady Roxy proceeded to bounce around in front of me to prove it.
“You holy knights really do heal up quick,” I said.
“I could say the same about you, Mr. Corpse!” she said cheerfully.
She hadn’t changed one bit. She was still the Lady Roxy I knew. But what about me? How much had I changed? If I hadn’t donned this mask, I didn’t think I could have talked with Lady Roxy in the way we spoke now—as equals, supporting each other. Yet it reminded me once again of how important those early days had been, back when being with Lady Roxy had been just another part of working as one of her servants. However, I also

knew that throwing that comfortable life aside and coming here had enabled me to support her more fully. So much had changed, yet the person I wanted to protect was the same…and I felt happy.
Lady Roxy interrupted my thoughts. “Let’s start looking for that fallen chimera.”
“Hang on a second. What about a way out of here?” I asked.
“We can’t just leave that monster. We have to ensure the great canyon is safe so the material-gathering supply runs can continue.”
“You holy knights. So conscientious.”
That said, I didn’t think many holy knights would have been so diligent. Certainly not someone like Northern. In this way, Lady Roxy reminded me of my teacher, Aaron Barbatos. Even ground down by years of pain and loss, he could never stand by while people suffered. He’d protected the survivors of his own estate’s tragedy for so many years. It didn’t matter how much he had to endure; Aaron was a knight who fought for his people.
Likewise, I’d prioritized escape, but Lady Roxy wanted to defeat the chimera. Her choice marked the difference between ordinary adventurers like me and true heroes who fought for the sake of the innocent. The noble silhouette of Lady Roxy’s back as she headed off to search captivated me.
I called out to her. “All right, well, let me help, then. I can’t just let you run off and do something like that on your own, can I?”
“Thank you. Well, let’s go!”
The way she bounded off exactly mirrored the girl I remembered from Seifort. Nostalgia overwhelmed me so suddenly that I didn’t even realize I’d spoken until the words had left my mouth.
“You…you really haven’t changed a bit,” I said.
Lady Roxy glanced back at me. “Did you say something?”
“No, it’s nothing… Er, in any case, perhaps it’s best to start our search where we first fell?”
“Given the chimera’s size, it likely took significantly more damage from the fall than we did. I’m guessing it hasn’t moved far from there.”
She said exactly what I was thinking. It was so refreshing to work with someone on the same wavelength.
Lady Roxy and I headed back to where we’d fallen. Far overhead, sunlight filtered through a large hole, lessening the darkness. It struck me then that, after we defeated this last chimera, this time together, just the two of us, would also come to its end. I glanced at Lady Roxy walking by my side.
She kept her eyes on the path ahead as she spoke. “Why did you come to Galia, Mr. Corpse?”
“Why ask now?”
“You’re different from the other adventurers I’ve met. It’s just a way you have. I’m curious.”
“I’m not that different. There’s no better place than Galia for hunting monsters and making money, so…”
A dark feeling seized me, as though fangs dug into my stomach.

“Mr. Corpse? What’s wrong?”
No, not now… My Gluttony, it’s…
I’d been careless.
A hunger so ravenous it threatened to swallow my consciousness assaulted me. It had been a long while since I felt so starved.
I unsheathed the black sword just slightly, just enough to catch my face’s reflection in its blade. Behind the skull mask that stared back at me, my right eye was stained a familiar crimson.
I’d fallen into my half-starved state.

This was my punishment for not hunting any monsters of worth after joining Lady Roxy and her troops. Even the two salamanders had been nothing but a snack to my now-bloated skill. But because Gluttony had been so quiet, I'd become complacent. I thought I'd be okay. That hope was why I'd given Lady Roxy the killing strike on the other two chimeras. Now I paid for it.

"Are you okay?" Lady Roxy repeated. "What's wrong?"

Lady Roxy was concerned. She studied me, trying to see what was so obviously bothering me. It had been a long time since I'd been attacked by such a sharp wave of hunger, and keeping it under any kind of control took everything I had. Trembling, I couldn't hide my eye from her sight.

"Don't look at me…" I said, my voice a pained whisper.

Even with my skull mask on, I had never wanted her to see these eyes. Eyes that caused monsters and people alike to shrink in fear from their ceaseless hunger.

Now it was too late.

Chapter 18:
A Grove of Duskstone

THERE WAS NO MISTAKING IT from her reaction. Lady Roxy had seen my eye. Gluttony's piercing red eye. She was surprised, but her expression remained serious.
"Your eye…" she said. She seemed startled, but unafraid. "What in the world…?"
I stood without answering. Her words sounded hollow, far away. I only heard what my hungering Gluttony told me, and it said that a delicious soul approached.
I took the black sword from its sheath. "The chimera. It's coming."
"What? But I still can't feel its presence!"
All the same, Lady Roxy unsheathed her own sword and dropped into a battle-ready stance. She doubtless remembered that the chimera had caught her by surprise on the surface as well. Unlike other monsters, chimeras had the power to mask their presence. I understood that, now that the half-starved state of Gluttony heightened my own senses.
"Stay here, Lady Roxy."
"But I can fight! Hey, wait!"
I sprinted away, leaving Lady Roxy behind. My ability to control Gluttony's starvation was nearing its limit. By following the flow of magical energy, locating the chimera was simple. I headed directly for it.
"You don't want her seeing you fight a monster like a monster?" laughed Greed.
"Shut up!"
The words—mocking and true—stung, enraging, but I had no choice. I had to fight. In the darkness of the cavern, I saw the chimera advance. I leapt up high and transformed Greed into the black scythe. When the chimera noticed me, it reared back and hastily summoned another wall of fire in a pitiful attempt to stop me. My blade cut right through the flames.
I used the momentum of my landing to slice through one of the chimera's front legs, cutting it off. The chimera let out a bellowing shriek as I cut off its remaining front leg, the stumps bubbling with its slow attempt to regenerate. Then, as I moved in to strike a killing blow to the high orc fused to its center, the chimera raised its two arms, both as thick as logs, to shield its core.
"Your defense means nothing to this hunger…" I growled.
I cut through it all—the arms, the core. However, I miscalculated, and the slice wasn't as deep as I hoped. I failed to sever the high orc's head. No issue. I readied another attack to silence the abomination once and for all. But as I raised the black scythe high above my head, I froze. The high orc,

still struggling to attack me despite its mortal wounds—it stared right at me, its wild eyes stained a bright, monstrous red.
Perhaps it only looked that way because of the bloodlust in my own eyes. But reflected in the piercing gaze of that high orc, oblivious to its condition as it scrabbled toward me, I saw my own fear.
I cried out in rage. “Stop it! Don’t look at me! Don’t look at me with those eyes!”
I used my Strength Overload skill, and my strength immediately doubled. I split the chimera and its high orc core entirely in two gory halves that fell to the cavern floor. I put so much power into the blow that the ground itself shook. I didn’t stop. Strength Overload was effective for about ten seconds, and I pummeled the chimera for all of them.
I don’t remember where or how I struck the monster, only the haze of anger and fear. When Lady Roxy’s voice finally brought me back to my senses, the chimera was in quivering pieces scattered around my feet.
This had never happened before. Through my fury, I hadn’t even heard the metallic voice inform me of my stat increase. I’d lost myself completely to the violence. Devouring the chimera’s soul had, at least, calmed Gluttony’s hunger. The emotions that drove my frenzy were now silent, and all that remained in the aftermath was a feeling of deep helplessness and self-disgust.
Lady Roxy didn’t speak a word, only stared at me silently. I couldn’t meet her gaze. Couldn’t look at what I’d rendered the corpse of the chimera into. I took a deep breath to still my heaving chest.
Just as my presence of mind returned, we heard a rumbling crack. The ceiling crumbled, and the earth, rocks, stone monsters, and even trees from the canyon above began to collapse into the cavern.
Lady Roxy and I retreated into the more stable depths of the cavern for cover and waited for the landslide to pass. We sat together in a heavy, awkward silence. As the rumbling quieted, and the dust settled, the cavern filled with light. We stood to look at the remains, and the sight captured our eyes.
“This is…”
“It’s beautiful!” Lady Roxy cried.
Clusters of duskstone crystals spread out before us, shining a gentle purple in the light of the sun. So, this was where they were. I’d spent all my time searching above ground, and it hadn’t once occurred to me that they might be hidden underneath the canyon. There were so many crystals of all sizes and arrangements.
In shock, I stared at the glimmering purple formations, their light sparkling against the steep walls of the sunken cavern.
“Duskstone forms on the bodies of monsters?!”
Lady Roxy nodded as she gently touched a cluster of crystals. I examined the shape of a monster I’d never seen before, a beast with the long tail of a snake. It had completely turned to stone centuries before, and a dense crop

of duskstone crystals sprouted from its back. It looked as though the duskstone used monsters as nourishment.
“You were looking for duskstone, but you didn’t even know where it came from?” Lady Roxy asked, though she sounded like she was going to laugh rather than chide me. “If you’d asked, I could have just told you! Granted, this is the first time I’ve ever seen duskstone in person.”
The clusters of crystals were not only beautiful, they were something of a blessing for me. Though they didn’t completely conceal my deed, they drew a temporary curtain over the annihilated chimera and my crimson eye. Exactly how far that curtain was drawn, I wasn’t sure; only Lady Roxy could say what happened in her own mind. But for now, as we marveled at the duskstone crystals, I felt she had left the curtain as closed as possible. That was just her sort of kindness.
“This much duskstone could keep us stocked for more than a hundred years. It’s just as they say: in the darkness of disaster shines the light of hope.”
Lady Roxy’s smile in that moment was the smile of a job well done. I took only as much duskstone as Jade had said was necessary for Greed’s scabbard, tucking it carefully into my pockets.
“With this,” I said, “I’ve got what I came for. How about you?”
“Yes, we’re done, though it’s unfortunate we couldn’t save the prior expedition.”
“I’m sorry…”
To say there was nothing Lady Roxy could have done felt too light. I could only commiserate.
After we’d separated and before the chimera ambush, Lady Roxy and her troops had found the canyon’s outpost. The encampment was burned to the ground, the entire place little more than ashes under smoking corpses. Lady Roxy had ordered that the fallen be given a proper burial, and Northern volunteered to take care of it. Then she left a group of men with Northern and headed out to find whatever monsters caused the fire. At that point, the three chimeras had attacked her.
I still felt there was some ulterior motive underlying the chimeras’ attack. It was as though they’d had a strategy for which they were prepared to sacrifice their lives—a far cry from usual monster tactics, to say the least. It felt similar to the incident with the salamanders. I returned once more to the fallen chimera, looking for something that might give me some clue.
“What’s wrong?” Lady Roxy asked, following me.
Although she deserved better, I couldn’t give more than a vague answer.
“I’m just curious about something. Call it a hunch.”
I checked over the head and shoulders of the fallen high orc’s body carefully, and I found what I was looking for. Just as with the salamanders, some kind of seal had been branded onto the high orc’s neck. I had a feeling that if we checked the orc chimeras on the surface, we’d find the same marks.

Was Lady Roxy being targeted? Having come this far, it was hard to think it could be anything else.
I thought back to Eris, the bearer of Lust, and what she'd told me at her saloon. How, by harnessing the phenomenon of hate in humans instead of monsters, a new generation of people with incredible skills could be born. How the hate building up in the common folk of the kingdom, their anger at their oppression by the holy knights, was nearing its limit, and needed only one last push to bear its new fruit. And how that last push…was Lady Roxy's death.
The salamanders had attacked her on the way to the canyon. It seemed the chimeras had been released with her destination already in mind. Was I overthinking it all? Or was this what Eris had tried to warn me about?
"Mr. Corpse, look over there."
Lady Roxy had moved away from where I was lost in thought. She waved to get my attention and pointed south, where she'd found a way back to the surface. When the ceiling had caved in, the fallen debris, monsters, and trees piled up on each other, creating a makeshift staircase. I walked over and tested the base with my boot.
"Seems stable enough to climb," I said.
"Right? What good fortune. Let's head back to the surface."
The two of us slowly and carefully made our way up the landslide and out of the cavern, climbing the debris by testing each step to be sure it could carry our weight. Not long after we made it back to solid ground, we heard Miria and Mugan shouting for us. We called back, and their familiar faces appeared.
I was relieved to see that Mugan now looked to be in good health. Fortunately, his injury hadn't been as dire as it first appeared. Lady Roxy was also relieved to see him safe.
"Lady Roxy! Lady Roxy!" Miria was, naturally, the louder of the two.
"Sorry for worrying you both," Lady Roxy said. "Thanks to Mr. Corpse, we've taken out the last monsters. But what about the two chimeras still here on the surface?"
We'd only killed the chimeras' cores, and Lady Roxy was concerned about what happened to their shells.
"They're over there," Mugan said, pointing. "But, well, something strange happened to them just before we found you. They disintegrated."
"How unfortunate…" Lady Roxy sighed.
She had wanted to investigate them. Unfortunately, if the chimera bodies on the surface were now dust, it was likely the minced chimera in the cavern had suffered a similar fate. Lady Roxy wasn't entirely out of luck, though. I told her about the chimera without a core I'd seen, which was still buried in the eastern cliffs. Mugan took some soldiers to check it out. Lady Roxy began to follow, but her troops halted her. Her exhaustion was clear to everyone.

Lady Roxy knew just how volatile chimeras were, and she turned to me.
“The chimera at the eastern cliffs, is it dangerous?”
“It’s fine. Only the creature’s face is visible. The rest of it, including the core, is buried in the rock. It has no monster to power it, and I wouldn’t expect it to move any time soon. If you’re worried, I can go with Captain Mugan and destroy it.”
“Would you do that for me?” she asked. “I don’t want that monster functioning ever again.”
“Very well.”
I headed straight to the eastern cliff in pursuit of Mugan and the other soldiers. When I caught up with them, I informed Mugan of Lady Roxy’s desire to have the inert monster destroyed.
“I was just thinking the same thing,” said Mugan. “But do you mind giving me a few hours to study it first?”
“Take your time.”
“And…” He hesitated. “I’m sorry. You’re not even a soldier, and we’re relying on you for so much.”
“We’ve come far enough together to put such apologies aside.”
“Thank you.”
Now that I’d saved the kingdom’s army from the salamanders and the chimeras, they saw me in a more favorable light. The soldiers working under Mugan chatted with me while they analyzed and documented the half-buried monster. They thanked me for fighting the chimeras earlier, and, a bit embarrassingly, grilled me about my relationship with Lady Roxy, because it looked like we’d really hit it off. It was simple and mostly pointless conversation, but since putting on my skull mask, I’d rarely bantered with people. I enjoyed it. As I watched over and talked with Mugan and his men, the hours passed in moments.
“Well, looks like we’re done,” said Mugan. “These chimeras are ancient Galian tech, right? I’d love to bring one back to Seifort for the Military District researchers to take a closer look at. But we can’t know when the rest of the rock will crumble and reveal the core, and we sure don’t want any other orcs hopping in to take it for a spin.”
“I’m impressed. Just a couple of hours, and you already have a thorough understanding of chimeras,” I said. “Do you know a lot about Galian technology?”
“Yeah…” Mugan scratched the back of his head. “It’s a little embarrassing, but it’s been my family’s main point of research for generations. My father studied it, and my daughter does now. I, uh, I’m no good at desk work. It doesn’t really suit my personality, so I joined the armed forces instead. But getting up close with old Galian technology like this just excites me… I can’t explain it.”
“I guess it’s in your blood. Does your daughter work in the Military District of Seifort?”

“Indeed she does. She’s not like her father at all—she’s actually got a brain in that head of hers. Wait a second, are you angling for a date with my daughter?!”
“No, no, I wasn’t asking because of anything like that! I was just curious.”
“Oh. I see. It’s just rare for you to show interest in others, Corpse. Since you joined us, you’ve always kept a firm distance.”
He was right. On top of hiding my true identity, I was worried about getting too close to anyone.
“Not that I mind, anyway,” said Mugan. “If you ever decide to take that mask off, I’d be happy to introduce you to my daughter.”
“If only it were so simple,” I said.
“Hah! I thought you’d say something like that.” Mugan laughed. “All right, Corpse, the chimera’s all yours.”
I unsheathed the black sword from its worn scabbard and stood facing the monster buried in the cliff face.
“This should put an end to things for the time being,” said Greed.
“Not quite yet it won’t,” I muttered. “We still don’t know who’s after Lady Roxy.”
“Your best course of action is to get back to Eris as soon as possible and strangle the information out of her.”
“She already told me everything she could. I can’t go betraying her kindness like that.”
“I see. In that case, I guess we’ll just have to do things your way. The slow way.”
I charged the black sword with my remaining strength, and when the flow was right, I engaged the tech-art Sharp Edge. It was a quick double-slice strike with high attack power, widely used by a range of adventurers. I didn’t call on it often, and with good reason. Sharp Edge left the user stuck in a recovery state for a long time. For someone like me, who almost always fought solo, being trapped in recovery mode was far too dangerous. The attack was best used as the finishing blow on the last remaining enemy in a group. This situation felt like a safe opportunity to finally try it out.
I was using this tech-art for another reason, too. I’d just used Strength Overload, and my strength stat had dropped to ten percent of its norm. It would take a day for it to return to normal. I had to make up for that lost power.
With the first slice, I lopped off the chimera’s head. With the second, I sheared through the rock face entirely, halving both the jagged rock and the chimera’s body. I quietly returned the black sword to its sheath as I looked over the long horizontal cut stretching across the cliff face before me. The metallic voice in my head recited the litany of my increased stats.
I’d successfully destroyed the last chimera. I turned my back to the monster and returned to Mugan and his troops.

“An impressive show of strength, Corpse,” Mugan said. “Amazing to think that you finished off such a beast with a commonplace tech-art like Sharp Edge. Those chimera hides are tougher than steel.”
“You speak too highly of me,” I said. “I still have a long way to go.”
“You? You still have a long way to go? What on earth are you looking to get in a fight with?! The gods themselves?!” Mugan burst into laughter.
I wanted to laugh along, but he wasn’t far off the mark. I couldn’t tell him that I needed to be ready to face the Divine Dragon. At my current level, I was no match for it. Before I could fight a monster of that strength, I needed to reach what Myne called the Domain of E, and I didn’t have the slightest idea how.
Mugan placed a hand on my shoulder. “I don’t know why you’re in such a hurry, but I think you’re doing just fine. It might be the bumbling old man in me when I say so, but nothing good comes from living life too fast, you know?”
“Yeah…”
Mugan looked a bit awkward when he saw my troubled face, and he quickly apologized for speaking without knowing my situation. I didn’t take issue with what he’d said, I just didn’t know how to respond. I didn’t have any answers. Frankly, Mugan’s words were exactly on point. Rushing was dangerous, not to mention exhausting. However, Myne had said that getting to the Domain of E would take me ten years. I didn’t have that much time.
We headed to the western side of the canyon, toward the outpost, to regroup with Lady Roxy. There, we found the graves for the missing soldiers. There must have been a few hundred at least. The gravity of the loss only sank in then.
I searched for Lady Roxy. “Ah, there she is…”
Even now, completely exhausted, Lady Roxy was at the front of a group, directing the burial preparations. She looked as majestic as always, golden hair and white armor glowing as she worked under the light of the setting sun. This was the Lady Roxy I had come to know so well.
I wasn’t aware I was staring in admiration until a familiar, smarmy voice called out to me.
“Why, hello there, Corpse!” Northern said, trotting over.
“Northern. Shouldn’t you be out there working instead of sitting on your thumbs?”
Unlike everybody else, who was covered in dirt and mud as they worked to bury the fallen, Northern looked practically pristine in his polished armor.
“I didn’t come here to get my hands dirty doing *that*,” he said. “Also, would you kindly stop poking your head into the kingdom’s affairs? It’s getting to be a real nuisance. Since I’m nice, I’ll give you one warning. Mind you, there won’t be a second.”
Northern didn’t wait for my response, walking off once he was done with his so-called warning. Even though he’d specifically volunteered to handle the burials, he left all the work to his troops. It was weird to me that Northern

didn’t seem to care about these fallen soldiers. He was the one who’d alerted Lady Roxy to their absence. In a way, Lady Roxy’s expedition was entirely his doing.
“What do you think?” I asked Greed. “Of Northern’s callous attitude, I mean.”
“There’s definitely something fishy about it. And, you know, he’s actually a highly skilled holy knight. I can tell by the way he holds himself. I’ve kept my eye on him since we started traveling with the kingdom’s army.”
“Are you saying he’s hiding his real power?”
“Exactly. At the very least, power like his would have no problem handling a chimera.”
“He’s no ordinary holy knight, then. And the air of danger I felt when I first met him…that wasn’t a mistake either.”
The mysterious holy knight, Northern Alistair… As I watched him walk away, I felt a strange growl from the depths of Gluttony. It was as if it saw Northern as a delicious morsel, a filling meal it wanted nothing more than to devour.
I returned to Lady Roxy’s side and helped the soldiers bury the fallen. The burials took a while. By the time we finally finished, dawn was breaking. The canyon was quiet with the stalking chimeras gone, and the sunrise over the great canyon was breathtaking. It illuminated the cracked earth we had marched over to get here, a stark contrast with the verdant green of nature within the canyon. Sunlight filtered through the mist and trees, reflecting off the leaves. It was hard to believe we were still in Galia.
However, we would soon leave this idyllic environment. Now that we had finished burying the fallen soldiers, we would take a short rest, then trek back to Babylon.
I retired to a tent prepared for me by the soldiers, where at last I could relax and sleep. I was grateful to have the chance to be with Lady Roxy for a little longer. It reminded me of the time we’d spent together back in Seifort.
“Thank you, Lady Roxy,” I whispered to the silence of the tent.

Chapter 19:
Black and White

A MONTH HAD PASSED since we returned from our expedition to the great canyon, but not a quiet month. The Divine Dragon had yet to cross the border toward Babylon, but on a number of recent occasions, it had come very close. When it did, my Gluttony awakened, urging me to act, to slay the beast, to devour it. I was left struggling to control this wild hunger as I waited for the dragon to return to central Galia.

I still didn't have enough power to face the Divine Dragon. Not just because of our huge stat differential, but because something else in me was also lacking. This lack was related to the Domain of E, I knew that much. But because I didn't know how to reach that place, there was nothing I could do but watch the time as it passed.

"Something on your mind, handsome?"

Eris sidled up to me where I sat at the counter in her saloon. Her luscious blue hair seemed to float around her shoulders as she directed her charming smile at me.

I turned to her, exasperated, and pointed at my skull mask. "You can't tell a thing I'm thinking while I've got this covering my face."

"You really think so? Well, I have my ways." Eris gave me a self-assured smile as she took a seat next to me.

Are you allowed to slack off this much on the job? I thought.

"The owner of this place is practically in love with me," Eris said, as if reading my mind. "I can do pretty much whatever I want."

"Keep that up, and this place is going to be in a whole lot of trouble."

I looked around at the unbelievable sight that was the saloon. It was filled near to bursting with all the unsuspecting people Eris's Lust had charmed. Behind the counter, the barkeep rushed from station to station, struggling under the sheer weight of all the orders.

"He's going to kill himself from overwork," I said.

Eris laughed. "But he says he can't bear to make me do that kind of labor…" She batted her eyelashes. Her eyes were rich with interest as they met mine.

I forced my gaze away. That was bad… She almost charmed me.

Eris clicked her tongue in mild annoyance. "Almost had you. Hey, look me in the eyes when I talk to you, won't you?"

"Think I'll pass. Don't like the idea of being charmed."

"Oh, come now. Just a little wouldn't hurt. What do you say?"

"No! No means no! I don't think you'd stop at just a little, anyway."

If she charmed me even in the slightest, it was all over. I could just *feel* it. All in all, her Lust struck me as an especially nasty Skill of Mortal Sin.

A lot had been said between Eris and myself the first time we met, not all of it positive, but in the end, I'd decided she wasn't my real enemy. After all, she had warned me Lady Roxy was in danger, and she'd promised she would remain a bystander, no matter what I did. Still, I couldn't trust Eris, not really, so I'd come to the saloon. I wanted to see whether she was up to anything.

Eris smiled as I peered at her with suspicion in my eyes. "You're here so often, sweetheart," she said, "what's a girl like me supposed to think?"

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not here because I'm looking to see you."

Eris moved up to me again, and I pushed her away. She gave me a bold grin full of cheek and leaned forward. "Oh! Don't tell me…you're playing hard to get?"

My face flushed under my mask. "What? You're out of your mind. You're never going to 'get' anything!"

"Boys can be *so* cruel…" Eris played her shock with a large helping of melodrama, slumping across the counter in limp dejection. She buried her head in her arms, then glanced at me just slightly as she whispered, pursing her full lips. "A little charm would do you some good, honey. Imagine it, Fate. You could be totally lovestruck."

"Yeah, that sounds terrifying."

Despite my ice-cold rebuke, Eris sprang at me as if wrapping her arms around me would change my mind. I struggled, trying to peel her off me, when I heard someone clear their throat.

You must be kidding…

I turned and saw, facing me, the holy knight who governed the sentinel city of Babylon: Lady Roxy Hart. She looked as dignified as ever, her white light armor only making her presence more radiant.

Despite her firm stance, her face twitched as she spoke. "I'm sorry to bother you while you're, er, having such fun, but may I have a word with you, Mr. Corpse?"

"Yeah, just, uh, give me a minute—"

I finally pried Eris loose and pushed her away, then sat her down. She clearly didn't like Lady Roxy's interruption, as she pouted and drank the rest of my wine.

First Myne, now Eris—why do I always find myself with these girls who take my things without a second thought?

However, I had more important concerns. Mainly, what business Lady Roxy had with me.

"You said you wanted a word?" I asked, as I turned back to face her.

"Oh, you don't know the half of it, Mr. Corpse. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

"Uh, no. Not at all."

Even when I thought hard, nothing came to mind. The problem couldn't be Eris; everyone in town knew *she* was just like that. Judging by Lady Roxy's face, however, I was clearly missing something. I scratched vacantly at my

skull mask and tilted my head in confusion. Lady Roxy sighed and took a piece of paper from one of the soldiers behind her, then read its contents to me.
“Fifty-six counts of violent behavior. Twenty counts of wanton weapon destruction. And these are just the reports filed in a single month. It’s unbelievable!”
Ooooh… So that’s what she’s talking about…
Taking out the jealous gang was such a regular part of my everyday routine that I no longer really thought about it. I’d even had to crack a few adventurers’ skulls on my way to Eris’s saloon today.
“I didn’t have a choice,” I explained. “It’s those guys, they just like me too much. They come at me *every single day.* And they don’t listen to reason, either. You know that.”
“It’s certainly true that Babylon seems particularly full of that very kind of stubborn adventurer,” Lady Roxy agreed.
“Right? They’re like ants to a skull-masked pile of sugar!”
“However, I warned you about this last time. I cannot support or defend a person who solves their problems through violence.”
Wait, did this mean she was finally sending me to the dungeon to, I don’t know, reflect on my actions? I felt a cold sweat under my skull mask.
Lady Roxy shook her head. “Do you know why the other adventurers keep attacking you?”
“Uh, because I’m a great sparring partner?” I tried to grin confidently, but it came out sheepish.
“No! It’s because you refuse to join a party. They’ll attack you if you’re alone, but if you’re part of a group, a *community*, they’ll have to back down. They’ll start a fight with one man, but not another party. It’s group dynamics. You need to join one.”
“You really think that would get me out of these pointless scuffles?”
Lady Roxy nodded. What she said made a kind of sense. The adventurers who attacked me were always in groups of at least five. Not a single one would have come at me on their own. In other words, even if the annoying adventurers still hated me, if I had backup, they’d be forced to back *off*.
“So, I have a suggestion,” said Lady Roxy. She took a scroll from the soldier behind her and passed it to me.
I unrolled the scroll and read its contents quickly. The words written upon it surprised me. “This is…”
“Indeed. How about it? You’re certainly qualified to work as a mercenary for the kingdom’s army. As a bonus, you’ll keep those hot-blooded fellows off your back.”
“Hm… Are you trying to buy me, Lady Roxy?”
Lady Roxy coughed in surprise, her expression suddenly awkward. “You’ve taken down a number of small-scale stampedes on your own. I’ve heard the reports and verified them with the trading post employees. Your actions in the great canyon of Galia were also admirable. There is no doubting your

strength. And at the moment, the army is in dire need of additional support. I uh, *also* happen to think it's best to keep a bit of a collar on loose-cannon adventurers like yourself."

It seemed as though I'd played it a little too wild in Babylon. My relationship with Lady Roxy had been fine at the great canyon, but the events of the last month had officially placed me on her list of municipal dangers.

I chuckled wryly behind my skull mask. "You realize I'm not a dog, right?"

"You're right, I apologize. It was a poor choice of words. It just looks to me like…" She glanced at me, apologetic and kind. "All I see is that you're living hard, fast, and reckless."

I heard genuine concern in her words. It reminded me of the last time she'd offered to hire me, as a servant of Hart Manor. But I wouldn't allow myself to depend on her protection again. I had decided that long ago, when I left Seifort.

Also, I had Northern to worry about. If he knew I'd joined the kingdom's army, he would take some kind of action. He'd gone out of his way to tell me there'd be no second warning. It was imperative that I move quickly if anything happened, which meant I needed to be well out from under Northern's thumb as well.

"I am grateful," I said. "Really, I am. But I have no intention of joining your army."

I expected a harsh response, but Lady Roxy took my words with a nod. "I understand. Somehow, I expected you might respond like this. In that case, will you accompany me to the yard for a moment?"

She pointed outside the saloon. It didn't feel like a question. I knew exactly what she intended without her having to say another word. I felt it in the change in her aura.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then we have a solitary cell waiting for you in the Military Sector. If you don't want that, you won't mind joining me for a short sparring session, will you? I am *very* curious about your true strength, Corpse."

With that ominous statement, Lady Roxy exited the saloon. I didn't know what I'd just gotten myself into. I wanted to avoid this confrontation if I could, but that didn't seem like an option. I was stuck. I had no choice but to cross swords with Lady Roxy herself.

Eris waved from her seat. "Well now," she said encouragingly, "isn't *this* a most exciting development!"

"Really happy-go-lucky, aren't you?" I grumbled.

"Don't mind me, I'm merely a bystander."

Of course she was. I bet that was her excuse for not saying anything to help me during my conversation with Lady Roxy. She'd just sat there with that cheeky smile, batting her eyelashes. Eris was quite the character.

When I placed my hand on the black sword, I was reminded yet again that *he* was quite the character too. *"Well now,"* said Greed encouragingly, *"isn't* this *a most exciting development!"*

“Could you please *not* repeat her?”
Greed burst into laughter. “Well, when you think about it, I’m merely a bystander too. I’m simply a weapon, you see. In any case, better get on out there, Fate. Keep Roxy waiting too long, and it’ll be solitary confinement for you!”
This isn’t a joke! It’s not funny! I thought as I followed Lady Roxy outside. She’d called this a sparring session. It couldn’t get too far out of hand. Right?
All the same, I wasn’t incredibly enthusiastic about this. But I didn’t have a choice.

Chapter 20:
The Black Sword Versus the Holy Sword

I WALKED OUTSIDE THE SALOON to find Lady Roxy standing a short distance away, in the center of a growing crowd of onlookers. Her soldiers directed people down the street so that they wouldn't get in the way, moving like men with a plan. It was clear to me now that Lady Roxy had intended to spar with me from the start.

She really wanted to fight me that badly? I thought with surprise. I hadn't encountered this side of her before.

The crowd grew. This whole experience was new to me. Until now, I'd always avoided fighting in front of people. Even during street fights, I tried to leave before there were many bystanders. On top of that, my opponent was Lady Roxy. She was a far cry from the mediocre adventurers I usually faced.

In this battle, I had absolutely no room for error.

Worse, I had nowhere to run. No matter where I went in Babylon, Lady Roxy would find me. I took a deep breath and prepared myself to endure what lay ahead. Then I tightened my skull mask to make sure it wouldn't fall off during battle and leapt into the air, flipping over the crowd and landing neatly in the open space where Lady Roxy waited.

"This is quite the scene," I said, straightening to face her.

"Really?" Lady Roxy asked, unmoved by my entrance. "I simply thought there would be no other way to convince you to spar."

"I see…"

You were right, too. I had to wonder whether she was overstepping her role as the governor of Babylon just a little, all to satisfy her own curiosity.

"So," I said, "what do you intend to do if you lose in front of this crowd?"

"There's no need to worry about me," Lady Roxy replied. "I'm not concerned about losing face. That said, I don't intend to lose, either."

Her gaze was serious, and it stayed on me as she unsheathed her blade. Her eyes only made my guilt heavier. To brush that feeling away, I unclipped Greed from my belt and held the black sword at the ready, still sheathed.

Lady Roxy's brow furrowed as she watched me take my stance. "You intend to fight me with a sheathed blade? Is this your idea of a joke?"

"It isn't. I'm entirely serious. The cutting edge of my blade is a little too sharp, so I'll fight you like this."

I settled into a battle-ready stance. The sheath was the one that none other than Jade Stratos had specially crafted with duskstone I brought back from the great canyon.

I loved this scabbard. It was a sharply designed black sheath with appealing gold highlights. I'd only wanted a sheath with the barest amount of gold, but Jade was smart, and he had a playful spirit. He'd added a particular

capability to the scabbard, and he told me about it with great excitement. Greed and I couldn't help but admire his genius.
Lady Roxy looked at me with resigned confusion as she settled into a battle stance of her own. "Don't blame me if your sheath breaks."
That was a natural concern for someone with the strength of a holy knight, but this scabbard was forged with this particular tactic in mind, although not for use specifically against Lady Roxy. This scabbard was strong enough to resist even the strike of a holy sword.
"Well," I said, "shall we get started, then?"
"Very well. Don't expect me to go easy on you."
We dashed in, closing the distance between us. Now it was time to see how strong Lady Roxy had grown. With a quick flash of Identify, I could have seen all her stats and skills with ease, yet…using that skill here felt somehow underhanded. I didn't want to resort to such tactics against her. She came into this battle honestly and seriously. I would respond to her feelings, strike to strike, blade to blade.
Greed chuckled. "A ruffian like you, playing the role of honorable knight? Laughable at best."
"Oh, shut up."
I ignored his stinging commentary as Lady Roxy and I engaged. Our blades clashed. The high-pitched shriek of metal echoed into the air. As I resisted, my boots dug grooves into the street.
Lady Roxy's blow was much heavier than I expected, and she wasn't finished. She launched another heavy strike. I blocked it, but its sheer force opened a crater in the cobblestones at my feet.
"A bit much, don't you think?" I muttered.
"I wasn't joking when I said I wouldn't go easy on you."
I shoved Lady Roxy up and away with the black sword, and she flipped gracefully through the air, landing out of lunging distance. The power of that first attack had truly been something to behold. It wasn't the kind of strength that came from any skill. It was pure technique, practiced and honed to deadly perfection, the kind of ability you only got through constantly pushing your performance to the very limit of your stats. With those two attacks alone, Lady Roxy proved how strong she had become.
I was confident that my stats surpassed Lady Roxy's, but when it came to controlling those stats, well, that was a different story. Usually, adventurers polished their skills by fighting monsters and strengthened their stats by collecting Spheres to level up. Normally, with that consistent progression, they never found themselves in a situation where they couldn't control their own powers.
But in my case, the more monsters I devoured, the more stats I gained, and my only limitation was the size of the stats of the monsters I ate. I had no natural growth curve. My stats grew exponentially, and occasionally plummeted just as quickly when I released them to Greed. That meant that my ability to use and control my own stats was severely lacking.

I did have something of a shortcut, but unfortunately, it was equally hard to handle. Controlling my skills completely meant engaging the half-starved state of Gluttony. That drastically increased my physical capability, but I also ran the risk of falling into a starved frenzy such as the one in the cavern. I could only rely on Gluttony when I had no other purpose but to obliterate my enemy, body and soul.
Here, now, facing off with a strong opponent in a battle that was *not* to the death… This wasn't a situation I'd prepared for, and even after training with Aaron, I wasn't very good at this sort of thing.
Not to mention the minor fact that my opponent was Lady Roxy.
As I stood there, black sword raised, trying to sort out my approach, Lady Roxy got tired of waiting and moved in for another attack. She dashed toward me.
"Do you always stand around zoning out in the middle of battle?"
"I've just… I've got some things on my mind…" I said.
"Unbelievable. Perhaps this will give you reason to take this fight more seriously." With that, she unleashed a flurry of strikes.
"Wha—?!" I barely had time to backpedal.
Surely this is against the rules! But, well, it wasn't. I just didn't want Lady Roxy to do exactly what she was doing: launch her attacks directly at my skull mask.
"Let's see who's hiding under that mask!"
"Wai—!"
Lady Roxy moved even faster than she had at the beginning of the match. In the next instant, she spun behind me. I turned to counter, but her sword lashed out before I had the chance to react, and my skull mask was almost sliced in half. I jerked back, falling into a roll, then used that momentum to flip away to safety.
I breathed a sigh of relief, but it only lasted a moment. The sound of armor cracking filled my ears. There was a fracture in my skull mask, and it was widening. I hurriedly used Identify to assess the damage.

Skull Mask
Durability: 10/20
Hides the wearer's identity from others by making them appear as a stranger.

Internally, I screamed. Agh! The durability is down by a whole half! But her sword barely grazed it!
I wanted to think it was because this skull mask was practically an antique, something I'd just picked up at a flea market, but I knew the truth—it was the unerring accuracy of Lady Roxy's blade. One more graze, and Lady Roxy would render my skull mask useless. My stomach churned at the thought of losing it, and to Lady Roxy's blade, no less.

“What’s wrong?” Lady Roxy prodded mercilessly. “You slowed down for a moment there. Is that how worried you are about revealing your true face?”
“No…n-no… It…it’s not that at…all!”
“You’re actually shaken. I wonder why…? Strange, isn’t it? I’ve become so very curious about what’s hiding under that mask of yours, Mr. Corpse.”
Lady Roxy smiled, playful and teasing. But I knew what that face meant. She was serious.
I panicked as I fought to protect my mask. “Hey, hey, wait a second. Didn’t you say this was a sparring match?”
“I did,” she agreed. “And it’s about time you started fighting me for real. Because if you don’t, you’re going to lose that mask you hold so dear.”
She was right. A *part* of me even enjoyed this. Here with her again, now, I just couldn’t seem to rid myself of my fond memories of the past. But another part of me… I was being sentimental, and that made me slow. My own carelessness had broken my mask.
In the end, was it possible to throw away that softer part of myself in battle, the way Myne and Aaron did?
No. No matter what happened, I was who I was. I had to face Lady Roxy with that same honesty.
“If that’s what you want,” I said, “then that’s what you’ll get.”
I poured magical energy into the sheathed black sword, and it glowed with a holy light.
Lady Roxy’s eyes widened in shock. “You—but—isn’t that…?!”
“It’s exactly what you think,” I said. “The holy skill!”
It was the holy knight tech-art Grand Cross. I activated it, and before it burst, I channeled the energy into the sword, just as Aaron had taught me. The new scabbard Jade Stratos had forged was an enhanced extension of my weapon, allowing me to use the Holy Sword Technique that, until now, I hadn’t been able to channel through Greed. All the same, I hadn’t expected to reveal this particular ability in front of so many people.
Granted, it really was the perfect opportunity. If Lady Roxy saw that I could use this skill that only holy swords could channel, then no matter what happened, she wouldn’t possibly think I was Fate Graphite. To her, Fate was one of the forsaken. He was a common person born with a garbage skill. Someone only in need of protection.
“If you’re capable of using the Holy Sword Technique, then you must be a holy knight of some renown… Or perhaps you *were* of some renown…?”
“No, I’m no holy knight,” I said. “Since the start, I’ve only been an adventurer.”
I charged the black sword with the rest of the spells I knew, and it glowed with power in my hands. Now it was *my* turn to attack. I didn’t need any schemes, plans, tricks, or tactics. I would show Lady Roxy clearly, and simply, the full power in which I placed my trust and my life.

Chapter 21:
A Pendant to Remember

I BROUGHT MY SHEATHED SWORD down hard, channeling enough strength into my attack to completely shatter Lady Roxy's holy sword. If I let our fight continue much longer, I'd slip up and reveal another opening for her to take advantage of. I felt bad about it, but there was only one way I could finish this. I was determined to take away her ability to fight.

However, betraying my hopes, her holy blade withstood my blow.

The sheer impact of our swords coming together sent the rapt onlookers into a stunned silence. My strike had been so heavy that it cowed even the lowlife adventurers in the crowd, the ones forever heckling me.

It only took a glance to discover how Lady Roxy had defended against my attack. She'd charged her own sword with the Grand Cross tech-art as well. Somewhere on her way from the kingdom to Babylon, she'd gained experience to match mine.

"Better luck next time," Lady Roxy said, still smiling through gritted teeth.

"I'm not done yet," I said.

I was still on the offense. Our battle was far from over. This time, I would force my way through to disarm her. In a straightforward battle of strength, the advantage was in my stats.

As our blades ground against each other, Lady Roxy's holy sword wavered under the pressure. A bead of sweat rolled down her cheek as she struggled to hold her ground against strength she wasn't prepared for. Gritting my teeth as well, I heaved, sending both her and the holy sword flying.

"Ah!"

Her startled voice in that moment was unexpectedly cute, unlike the dignified voice of the Lady Roxy I was used to. I felt the weight of guilt on my shoulders once more. The crowd watching us booed me loudly. I was the villain in their eyes, complete with the mysterious skull mask that ensured I looked the part.

It didn't matter what they thought. It was time for me to end this match. I launched off the ground, leaping at Lady Roxy as she completed her flying arc toward the building behind her. It would take her a few moments to recover her bearings. I'd use that time to knock her blade from her hand and make sure she couldn't continue to fight. Our match ended here.

Just at the moment that I prepared to strike, I spotted a sapphire-blue pendant in flight, a necklace that had been hidden under her chest piece.

Is that…?!

For a moment, I was unable to move.

She's still carrying it with her.

In that pendant was set the jewel I'd given her back when I was still a servant at Hart Manor, during our undercover adventure. I remembered the

day Lady Roxy left on the military expedition to Galia with bitter clarity. She'd turned to me and said she'd treasure the jewel always—that she would craft it into a pendant.
And she had.
Even now, she wears it against her heart…

Greed barked at me through Telepathy, interrupting my sentiment. I snapped back to focus, but it was too late. Lady Roxy swung her blade as we flew through the air, knocking the black sword skyward, out of my grip.
“Huh?!”
It happened so suddenly that my shock made me yelp. As Greed left my hand, I heard his frustrated cry fade into the distance.
“You idiooooooo—”
It was only a sparring match, but that single lost moment cost me dearly. Eris, who had at some point made her way into the street with the rest of the crowd, doubled over, clutching her stomach as she laughed. No way would she let me live this down the next time I visited the saloon.
I hit the ground before Greed did. As he fell from the sky, the remains of my skills and the force of Roxy’s heavy blow sank the sword, scabbard and all, into the cobblestones several yards away from me. I hesitated to recover the black sword, however. I’d be in for an earful the instant I touched the hilt.
Lady Roxy stood over me as I stared at the sky, her blade pointed directly at my mask. I slowly put my hands up in a show of surrender.
Thus, the victor was decided.
Lady Roxy sheathed her sword, but she didn’t look satisfied with her victory. She handled the pendant with great care as she tucked it back within her chest plate, then let out a sigh as she turned to me once more. I kept my hands up as I rose to my feet.
“Why did you do that?” she asked. “Why did you go easy on me at that moment?”
“What are you talking about? I…”
“I might have won, but I’m not at all satisfied with how that went! Get yourself together so we can settle things in a second round.”
“Please,” I said, “spare me this.”
I just…couldn’t bring myself to fight her. Not even when sparring. Our match had literally beaten that realization into me.
“I think that was more than enough,” I said. “I’m out of here.”
“Hey… Wait a moment!”
The crowd cheered for Lady Roxy and booed me as I walked to Greed and yanked him from the ground where he was stuck.
“You pitiful wimp, you loser…” he muttered.
“Sh-shut up, you!”
Ignoring the commentary, I made to leave. The sparring match was settled, and I’d avoided being thrown into the dungeon. It was best for me to vanish for a time. Sticking around would only earn me another shower of insults.
Yet Lady Roxy continued to call out as I walked away, and when I didn’t listen, she darted forward to block my path.
“I have one thing I want to ask you,” she said.
“What is it this time?” I asked, exhausted.
“Where did you learn that swordsmanship? I felt the same thing when we were in the canyon, but now I’m sure of it. You fight like Lord Aaron

Barbatos. Your footwork, your bladework—you're practically a mirror image of his techniques."
Something was bothering her. A sudden serious look crossed her face as she went on.
"On my way to Babylon, I met Aaron Barbatos. He was rebuilding the once-fallen castle of Hausen. He had long ago retired and given up being a holy knight, but…" She stared into my eyes. "He told me an encounter with a particular young man gave him reason to retake his holy sword."
Ah, so Lady Roxy had met Aaron too, after he and I cleared Hausen of the monsters roaming its streets. If I'd lingered in Hausen a little longer, perhaps Lady Roxy and I would have reunited earlier. I shouldn't have been surprised at this coincidence. Our destinations had always been the same, as had the paths we walked to get there.
Lady Roxy reached out for my hand. I pulled it back in refusal. I wasn't in control of my own skills right now, and if she touched me, I'd only end up unintentionally reading her mind.
"Aaron wouldn't tell me that young man's name," she said. "But he did tell me the young man was headed for Galia. And he told me another thing, too—that the young man suffered from a power he couldn't control. If you are that young man, then please, let me…"
"I don't know what to tell you," I said, cutting her off. "Even if I were, that problem would be mine to deal with. Alone. It wouldn't be one for you to trouble yourself with. Here in Galia, the first person you should worry about protecting is yourself."
Lady Roxy was always too kind…even as calamity closed in around her. However, that kindness had saved me. If I'd never met Lady Roxy, if I'd never discovered the truth of the skill I was born with through her intervention, my Gluttony would have by now run rampant, turning me into nothing more than a frenzied, endlessly hungry monster.
"You just never change, do you?" I said. "You always stick to your beliefs, no matter what…"
My words were drowned out by the sudden wail of sirens throughout Babylon.
What…is this?
I'd never heard such a cacophony before. The crowds erupted into panic. Even if I didn't understand what was going on, they all knew what the sirens meant, and they responded accordingly. Lady Roxy did as well. The heavy weight of her aura, her readiness for battle, set me on edge.
Ah, I get it now, I thought.
I stared out from Babylon toward the south. A black horizon swept toward the sentinel city's walls like a storm, blotting out the Galian sky. In this air of anxiety and encroaching doom, a holy knight appeared. He pushed through the crowds with a group of hardened adventurers in tow, his blond hair tousled by the breeze.
Northern Alistair.

Chapter 22:
The Death Parade

NORTHERN GLANCED TOWARD ME with some surprise, but he headed to Lady Roxy.
“Lady Roxy,” he said. “A large-scale stampede is closing in on the border.”
Lady Roxy listened, calm and composed, as if she hadn’t just tried to fight me to the last. “A death parade…” she mused. “How large?”
“It’s on the smaller side, but we estimate around fifteen thousand monsters.”
“Understood. How long until they reach the border?”
“At this rate, four hours.”
“Then we must strike before they arrive. Tell me what measures we’ve taken thus far.”
Lady Roxy nodded to me and left, discussing plans with Northern. She was ready to lead her army to the border to stop the death parade. This was the very reason she had been posted to Babylon. Her father had lost his life facing just such a threat.
I had refused her offer to become her mercenary. I would not be part of her preparations.
Regardless of my place in this battle, I was worried. As I watched Lady Roxy’s back, my eyes met Northern’s. He grinned.
“That smug bastard,” I muttered.
I didn’t know what he meant to convey with that grin. Satisfaction that, thus far, I had heeded his warning and done nothing? Or did he think me a coward? Maybe his smile said that his place was by Lady Roxy’s side, and mine wasn’t. It could have meant anything, but it oozed with arrogance, and I didn’t like it one bit.
Lady Roxy and Northern vanished down the avenue, leaving me on my own. The crowd that had gathered to watch us fight receded, drawn off by the sirens. I watched them flee as Greed spoke to me through Telepathy.
“What are you going to do now, Fate?”
“You already know,” I said. “And besides, I’m starving.”
“Hm. You’re heading out there, are you?”
There was nothing else to say. As I left, I noticed Eris standing amidst the dispersing crowd, alone in her stillness. Her clear eyes met mine, an unspoken plea. She had never shied from speaking her mind, yet her expression now was timid.
I can’t waste another moment, but…
“What’s wrong?” I asked, approaching Eris. “That face isn’t like you.”
She turned her back to me and took a few steps away. Then, in a voice only a little louder than a whisper, she said, “You shouldn’t go out there.”

“It doesn’t matter what you say, I’m going no matter what happens.” I hesitated. “But, thank you…for your concern.”
“You never did listen to good advice.”
Then, without turning back, Eris ran into the saloon. She’d said from the start that she was only a bystander. She could tell me I strode into danger, but she couldn’t tell me *what* danger. However, even this vague warning was new information. I now knew the coming death parade was no ordinary stampede. I believed Eris, and I was grateful for whatever she could say.
It was time to face my future. As I walked toward the city walls, I put my hand on the hilt of the black sword. “Greed, can I ask you something?”
“What is it now?”
“You can sense them, can’t you? The others who bear Skills of Mortal Sin and their weapons?”
“Yes, but right now, only within the bounds of Babylon. Why do you ask? You never cared to know before.”
Until now, I hadn’t dared ask. I hadn’t wanted to think of the possibility. I feared the others like me—their power, their hostility. I could never stand up to the monstrous strength of someone like Myne. However, it was no longer just my life on the line. My fear was no excuse.
If Eris had spoken truth, someone out there wanted to use Lady Roxy’s death as a trigger—one that would change the world with hate. I couldn’t help suspecting that this schemer also bore a Skill of Mortal Sin, or a power of similar strength. That person had to be in Babylon.
“Well, you and Eris are the only ones here in Babylon,” said Greed, reading my emotions. “I don’t sense anyone else.”
“What? Really?!”
“Yes, but it could be they’re masking their power. You’re still a rookie, but that’s not so hard for an experienced hand. Just look at Eris. We had no idea she was trailing us. You found her when she wanted you to.”
So, we couldn’t know either way. The threat remained hidden.
Nevertheless, I couldn’t sit around thinking about all the danger I couldn’t see, all the outcomes I couldn’t predict. I clenched my fist.
“But I will say this,” said Greed. “I’m a little relieved.”
“What? Why?”
“If you’d let Eris get into your head, you’d have lost sight of all the other lurking dangers. It’s clear to me now—you’ve gotten a bit stronger.”
“It’s about time you stopped treating me like some kid. I know I have to be ready to face more than just the Divine Dragon.” Whatever waited for us might well be more dangerous.
Greed broke out in an uproarious laugh. “You think I treat you like a kid?! Fate, to me, you’re a newborn baby!”
Okay, okay, you’re a four-thousand-year-old sword, I get it. That extraordinary length of time was probably where all Greed’s quirks came from. It’d make anyone odd. To me, life was still new. But four thousand

years of such a regrettable personality? Ugh, it was almost worth feeling sorry for.
“Hey, Fate.”
“What?”
“Don’t do anything reckless.”
“Now you say that?”
In the early days of my awakening, I had learned to treat my Gluttony as a threat. Now, it felt unnervingly under control. Present, but balanced. Patient.
“I’ll be fine,” I said. “Now, and in the future, I’ll be just fine.”
I walked down the main street as adventurers passed, one after another. All were decked out in fancy armor, and all ran for the main gates to the north. After Lady Roxy and her army defeated the main wave, these adventurers would hunt the leftovers. Even the mediocre rejects would make a killing mopping up after the kingdom.
I put a hand to my skull mask and continued south toward the Military Sector.
“Fate,” said Greed, “the exit is behind you. Remember? The gate? It’s in the opposite direction.”
“We’ll be fine,” I said. “We’re going this way.”
The army was on the move, the adventurers were dashing eagerly to their bounties, and the merchants were in a panic. I wanted a path without so many people, and thanks to the death parade, the Military Sector had its hands full. I could move through it with ease, and nobody would get in my way.
“We’re going to take one hell of a shortcut,” I said.
Putting my strength stats to good use, I jumped onto the roof of a shop.
“Ah,” said Greed. “Taking the scenic route?”
“Exactly!”
I didn’t intend to head straight to Galia. Once perched on the adamantite walls, I would observe the movements of Lady Roxy’s troops as they led the charge. If they faced an ordinary death parade, they’d win in a clean sweep. I knew this. I’d felt Lady Roxy’s power in our so-called sparring match. She was strong. Immensely strong. My job, then, was to watch over her and her army, positioned to intervene the second I spied anything unusual—or straight-up deadly.
When I landed atop the walls overlooking Galia, the strength of the wind surprised me. If I lost my footing or let my focus slip, it would blow me away, right back down to the city streets.
I braced myself against the gale and looked south. The ground and sky were a blanket of darkness. The monsters were still so far away, but the more I stared, the more they came into focus. A death parade, yes, but one that consisted of far more than the fifteen thousand monsters Northern warned us of.
“It’s unbelievable,” I muttered.

“It’s your first time seeing a death parade, huh? Here’s some advice: don’t kill too many monsters at once. The sudden stat rise will only madden Gluttony.”

“I’ll be careful. I don’t care to go through that again.”

I remembered facing my first crowned beast, “The One Named Howl,” all too well. Its soul had been delicious, unlike anything I’d eaten before. The shock sent my Gluttony wild with glee, leaving me overwhelmed and writhing on the ground. I’d struggled to maintain consciousness and bashed my head against a rock.

I didn’t think on the memory with much fondness.

If I had to go through that in the middle of battle, the monsters would pounce and send me straight to the afterlife. I’d trained this whole journey to control Gluttony, but this stampede was made up of tens of thousands of monsters as strong as or stronger than The One Named Howl. Tens of thousands of delicious souls. Enough to send me straight into insanity.

Fortunately, controlling the monsters was up to the kingdom’s army. I didn’t have to tackle the death parade head-on.

Soon, I spotted them. Lady Roxy directed her troops from atop her white horse. They’d analyzed the trajectory of the death parade and aimed to cut it off at the border.

The archers and spellcasters took up position to winnow down the enemy numbers from a distance. The main force would meet whatever monster survived at close quarters. They would leave the crowned beasts to Lady Roxy, a holy knight with the power necessary to take them down. I watched as the two forces closed in on each other.

“Let’s get started,” I said.

“I’m ready when you are.”

I drew Greed from his scabbard and transformed him into the black bow. I hadn’t spent the last month killing and devouring monsters for nothing. All of this had been training to push our abilities to their limits.

Chapter 23:
Power that Transforms

THE WAVE OF MONSTERS poured in from the south, colliding with Lady Roxy's army, which stood ready and waiting. The vast majority of the monsters were green-skinned orcs, but a significant number of crowned beasts ran among them. However, Lady Roxy wasn't the only holy knight in this battle. The monsters didn't have the upper hand. Not yet.

My Gluttony remained quiet. It felt no threat from anything fighting in the battle. I breathed a sigh of relief and continued to watch from my vantage point high above. Then Greed sensed something.

"There's something heading this way," he said. "It's coming from the east, and it's coming fast."

I turned to look. "There's nothing there…"

As far as I could see, it was just barren wasteland.

"Is it strong?" I asked.

"It is."

"Then there's no reason for me to hold back any longer."

If I couldn't see it approaching, then I had to make it so I could. It was time to use the skill I'd learned in the battle against Haniel.

"Were you listening when I told you not to be reckless?" Greed asked.

"It's too late for that now."

I took a deep breath, calmed my heart, and readied myself. I couldn't see the incoming threat, but I would devour it. It was me or them. Life or death. I called forth my Gluttony.

For an instant, my right eye burned with intense heat. I had successfully engaged Gluttony's half-starved state.

"You've gotten much better at doing that," Greed remarked.

"It's all that training you put me through."

"Hah! 'All that training?' That was nothing. You've still got a long way to go with me."

Even in my half-starved state, I felt calm and in control. I could really give it my all now. My eyes traced the flow of magical energy, and I looked eastward again.

"What is that?"

Something huge moved under the ground, swimming through the earth as though through water. It was still much too far away to Identify. I scanned the rest of the battlefield, making sure nothing else unexpected was approaching. The field was otherwise clear.

I turned back to study the swimming shape. If it kept on its current path, it would burrow right underneath Lady Roxy and her troops. Would she sense the monster while locked in battle? It seemed unlikely. Even if she did, there wouldn't be enough time to warn her soldiers, let alone respond. The

sheer size of the monster would cause serious damage. I was looking at the makings of a fatal pincer trap.
“We have to stop it before it reaches the army,” I said.
“This is the biggest battle you’ve ever been part of. Don’t lose yourself to it.”
I could feel it—the strange mix of pressure and excitement in the air. Bloodlust and destiny. This was no ordinary battle. Greed was right. There was a chance I’d lose myself to my Gluttony, no matter how stable it seemed now.
“Get ready, Greed,” I said.
“Oh, you want to use that. Very well.”
This would have been the perfect time to use the black bow’s secret technique, but the Bloody Ptarmigan attack required ten percent of my stats, and I wanted to save as many of those as I could. Orcs wouldn’t bring my stats back up quickly enough. For that reason, I wanted to try a tech-art I’d modified, one that required me to be in my half-starved state.
I’d gotten inspiration for this tech-art while fighting the undead in Hausen alongside Aaron. My Gluttony had somehow affected him, and he’d experienced a limit break—a phenomenon in which an adventurer broke through their maximum level. I’d wondered whether I could do a similar thing to my own skills. By experimenting, I learned that I could change my tech-arts with my skills, much like I did with my elemental arrows or my orichalcum-enforced scabbard.
With practice, I developed the modified tech-art I called the Spiral Charge Shot. By itself, Charge Shot increased a bow’s range. With the Spiral Charge Shot, charging the bow with magic meant one’s range increased—accompanied by a drastic increase in the piercing power of the arrow.
“The most fascinating idea you’ve had,” said Greed, “was adapting the skills you don’t use to match my weapon forms.”
“Well, I can’t always rely on your secret techniques, or I’ll run out of stats.”
“Big words, little man.”
Then I’ll show you, I thought. It’s not words that will fire this arrow.
Now that one of my eyes was stained crimson, it was all too easy to follow the movements of the massive monster swimming through the earth. I took aim and loaded the bow with magical energy. The black arrow flickered with sparks of electricity, but it wasn’t enough. As I poured more magic into the arrow, the bow itself sparked audibly, and my left hand numbed as I pulled the arrow back. *Just a little more*.
The monster dove forward, but I followed even its smallest movements. Then, when the arrow seethed with magic, I fired.
The arrow did not falter. It pierced the air as it shrieked eastward, cutting a black bolt through the sky. It vanished into the earth, never slowing as it plunged toward its target.
After a moment, the earth rocked wildly. Just as I thought the quake was over, the area where my arrow had disappeared erupted. An enormous,

translucent monster shaped like a blue whale burst through the crumbling earth and flew into the sky.
“Did you see that? We got ourselves one hell of a catch!”
Greed bellowed with laughter. *“It’s a big one, all right!”*
“I’ve never caught such a huge monster,” I said, a bit awed.
Still, it wasn’t dead yet. Before it could dive, I had to reach it, and fast.
I leapt. As I fell, I kicked the outer wall with all my strength and launched myself through the air, to the east. I couldn’t help laughing as I descended.
“What’s so funny?” the black sword asked.
“I was just thinking, ‘What would the old Fate have thought if he saw me throw myself off a giant wall like that?’”
“You’re going to give me all sorts of grief if you don’t wake up to your potential soon, Fate. You’ll hurt yourself too, soon enough.”
“Yeah, yeah, I know.”
As I landed, I engaged the full power of my strength and agility, carving up the earth as I ran. The blue whale-like shape still floated in the sky, rippling as it reoriented itself. Each of my steps carried me hundreds of feet. I’d reach my target in about ten paces. Clutching the black bow, I closed in.
When I got in range, I used Identify.
“Show me what you got.” After using Identify, I couldn’t hide my shock. *Are you for real?*
“Probably shouldn’t be so surprised,” said Greed. “This kind of thing is common in Galia.”
“Seriously?”
It was a crowned beast, yes, but I still couldn’t believe what I saw. Had it gotten so big because of Galian nutrition? All the monsters of this type that I’d seen in the past had been much, much smaller—even cute, in a way.
As for the monster’s stats, I had to read them a second time before I could accept the truth.

Chapter 24:
The Formless Ravager of the Earth

Ravager of the Earth
Omega Slime, Lv 440
Vitality: 13,360,000
Strength: 8,760,000
Magic: 11,983,000
Spirit: 11,248,000
Agility: 5,347,000
Skills: Corrosion (Spell), Vitality Boost (High)

Well, I could now say for sure that when slimes got this big, they stopped being remotely adorable.
Because slimes were essentially formless, they could shapeshift at will. When this monster swam through the earth, it had taken a cetacean shape for ease of movement.
The omega slime's level was exceptionally high, and on top of that, some of its stats surpassed ten million. Even a holy knight would be forced to play defense against a monster like this. The crowned beast loomed above me, emanating doom.
The omega slime abruptly became aware of me, and its body expanded in the air.
"The shield, Fate!" Greed roared. "Use it! Use it now!"
I transformed the bow into the black shield just as the omega slime loosed a flood of sludgy liquid, which cascaded over the shield to the ground. I'd managed to use the shield as an umbrella, but everywhere that rain fell, the earth disintegrated.
"Whoa, whoa! What the hell?!"
Greed had saved my life. Even if my stats were higher than the omega slime's, I would have had no way to escape a direct hit like that. The rain melted through the ground, dissolving whatever it touched into steaming, hissing goop.
"It's a strong acid," said Greed, "and it took me by surprise. I didn't think the omega slime would belch that crap out as its very first attack."
"You're supposed to tell me about this stuff *before* the fighting starts."
"Aren't you supposed to already know that a slime's body is comprised entirely of acid?"
"Yeah, but who would have guessed it'd just vomit its guts up on me like that? Ugh, what's that smell?"
The air around me filled with the stench of waste, like something rotting. I had to hold back the urge to vomit.
I wonder if this… I peeked out from behind the shield and used Identify on the omega slime's Corrosion spell.

Corrosion (Spell): Adds a corrosive effect to all physical attacks. Anything touched by the spell decays.

The skill was brutal. When the omega slime had belched up its acid, it had been enhanced by the Corrosion spell. Hence the earth melting into deep pits all around me. That better explained how the slime could "swim" through the ground as well. It used its acid to corrode the earth and rocks in its way.

A battle at close quarters would be impossible. If I cut the omega slime with the black sword or scythe, any resultant spray of acid could melt right through my bones.

"What an annoying monster," I said.

"Some monsters can't be beat by sheer stat differential. This is probably a good lesson for you."

"You condescending scrap of steel…" I muttered.

I transformed the black shield back to the black bow and aimed at the falling omega slime. I had to take care of this thing quick.

"Take ten percent of my stats," I told Greed. "Let's end this."

"Huh? Didn't you just say you didn't want to rely on my secret techniques?"

I could hear the smile in Greed's voice. It was very, very annoying. "Just shut up and do it!"

"All right, all right, you're in a hurry. I get it. Hold tight while I help myself to those stats…"

The omega slime rolled in the sky, moving directly above me. Its gigantic form was going to crush me. Acid leaked from it. So, yeah. I was in a hurry.

Greed sapped the stats from my body. It was a feeling I'd experienced over and over, but I could never get used to it. Power was squeezed out from within me. Greed didn't care.

He transformed explosively in my hand. The lithe form of the bow grew ominously larger, spikier. Apocalyptic. This, I had grown used to—Greed's First Level secret technique. I also knew how powerful the recoil could be. I had to stay focused.

I shoved the heels of my boots hard into the ground, readying myself, and took aim at the writhing blanket of the omega slime falling above me. As I loaded a black arrow on the powered-up bow, I imbued it with the Fireball spell to ensure that it burned even the last splashes of acid into embers and ash.

In my half-starved state, I could see the flow of magic within the omega slime's body. I followed that flow to the center of the monster. All the way to its weak point. I adjusted my aim, and I fired.

The crimson arrow leapt from my bow with a roar like thunder. It left a trail of embers as it transformed into lightning and passed through the omega slime. The area around me erupted into flame and steam from the evaporating monster. I felt the impact, and yet…

“Did you get it?” Greed prodded.
“Quit acting like you don’t know. You’ll feel it as soon as I do.”
Greed laughed. “Yeah, I know. I just wanted to say it!”
If I’d defeated the omega slime, that monotonous metallic voice would have told me my stat increase and new skills. However, it remained silent.
The omega slime was still alive.
I had to move. I kicked off the ground hard, leaping backward. As I did, a giant ball of translucent blue crashed to the earth where I’d just stood. The land under the slime melted instantaneously into a gaping hole. In the next instant, a blast of melted earth fired out around the monster.
“Is that even allowed?!” I spat through gritted teeth.
“Ah, I see. It defended against my secret technique by splitting in two and using half of itself as a shield. Pretty clever for a slime.”
“And now it’s tunneled into the ground again?”
“Eh, yeah, but the omega slime only has a single core. Just aim for that, and don’t get fooled when it splits again.”
“You make it sound so easy…”
To kill this thing, I either had to get closer when I attacked, or I needed the kind of firepower that would burn through core and clone alike.
“If I’d known about this beforehand, I would have given you *twenty* percent of my stats.”
“Well, that’s what you get for being a cheapskate. You get gun-shy at the strangest times.”
“Oh, shut up.” Now wasn’t the time for arguing. *Where did the omega slime go?*
I traced its magical energy to its location. “I don’t know why, but the slime’s ignoring us,” I told Greed. “It’s moving west.”
“Hm, that means it’s still headed for the army.”
I nodded. The slime wasn’t running from me. It chased some other goal. Crowned beasts were more intelligent than most monsters, sure, but…to this extent? It was ignoring the threat that just cut it in half and would now hunt it down? That bothered me. It didn’t feel like the slime was fighting on instinct.
I sensed something calculating in its actions. Something…human.
I transformed Greed back into the black sword and sheathed him. Then I leapt into the sky and charged the holy sword tech-art Grand Cross, which I aimed directly at the earth below. Three deadly blue bubbles—clones of the omega slime—popped up from the ground. They dissolved in the holy light of the tech-art.
“A surprise attack, huh?” Greed said thoughtfully.
“Yeah. It tried to look like it wasn’t interested, but it had a trap waiting for me. Something about this slime’s cunning doesn’t feel right.”
“Don’t forget what Eris said. Don’t let your guard down.”
Greed was right, but I had to hurry. I couldn’t let the omega slime get underneath the kingdom’s army. I headed west, incinerating every

remaining blob of slime that tried to block my way with the searing holy light of my Grand Cross.

Chapter 25:
Black Bullets of Calamity

EVEN AFTER I CAUGHT UP to the omega slime, there was the question of how to attack it. There was a deep ravine in the earth running north, which I had passed on the way from the outer walls of Babylon to get to the slime in the first place. The quickest way to reach Lady Roxy's army was across that ravine. As I followed its trajectory, I guessed it intended to do just that. Thus, it would reveal itself as it jumped. That would be my best chance to attack.

Unless…

"What's wrong?" Greed asked.

"It's nothing." I had to be prepared, even if my gut was right.

Greed saw right through me, and the black sword laughed. *"Fate, your pulse quickened."*

"Running through the desert like this?" I said. "That'd happen to anyone."

"That better be all it is."

Greed was always like this. At least he had provided a momentary diversion from my anxieties.

I reached the ravine and kept my eyes on the omega slime as I picked up my pace and dove over the cliff edge. As I fell, I took Greed from his sheath and transformed him into the black bow.

"Greed!" I shouted. "Twenty percent!"

The black bow devoured my stats. It once again morphed in size as it strangled the power from my body. I wasn't done, though. I wanted insurance. I added the modified tech-art Spiral Charge Shot to the nocked arrow for good measure. It was the first time I had ever tried adding a skill to Greed's secret technique, but I trusted that he could control it. If the sword wanted to talk a big game, then I'd have him back up his words with big plays in battle.

"Fate?!" the black sword shouted. *"What the hell?!"*

My sudden supplement took him by surprise. I brushed off his yelp. With this addition, it didn't matter whether the omega slime divided itself to make a shield. Let it try. The piercing power of this arrow would skewer both halves.

The omega slime's magical energy grew as it neared the cliff face, its shape just breaking through the rock wall. I waited for it to reveal itself. I had to make the timing count.

Now!

The omega slime burst through the melting rock wall like a blue whale breaching. I took aim directly at the crowned beast's core and poured the entirety of my magical energy into the black bow. Then I fired.

The whiplash was stronger than ever before, and because my feet had nowhere to stand, it sent me flying downward. But my aim was on point. As long as the arrow kept on course, it would hit. And then…
“Damn it. Talk about bad timing!” I spat.
Something fired from above, and it traced a black line between the omega slime and I as we parted. Three small shapes streaked through the air, equally fast. Even in my half-starved state, with my physical abilities magnified, I couldn’t follow their movement. All I saw were black streaks whipping by.
Then a different shape traced a line of red, blending with the arrow I’d fired at the omega slime. The red shape and my arrow landed simultaneously. Though usually my attack would have opened a gaping hole in both the earth and the omega slime, at this moment, a completely different sight greeted my eyes.
The core of the omega slime had eaten my attack, but the slime was still alive, complete with a gaping hole through its center.
Are you for real…?

Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +13,360,000, Strength +8,760,000, Magic +11,983,000, Spirit +11,248,000, Agility +5,347,000. Skills added: Corrosion (Spell).

I heard the metallic voice ring through my head, letting me know I’d eaten the soul of the omega slime. So why was the slime’s body still moving in front of me? Having lost its main form, it writhed haphazardly, spraying acid across the ravine.
I had just consumed more than ten million stats. It had been a long time since I made a meal of such a high-quality soul, and Gluttony went wild with bliss, numbing my brain. It thrust me back into my sated, normal state, but the ride wasn’t over.
Not that I was in any position to relax in the first place.
“Fate! It’s dangerous here! Move!”
“I-I’m on it.”
Still disoriented, I jumped from wall to wall, climbing the ravine to the surface.
“Finally, our foe makes their grand entrance,” Greed mused. “From the feel of it, it’s another Weapon of Mortal Sin like me.”
“Just like Eris said. Are they dangerous?”
“Unlike anything you’ve ever faced.”
I was almost back to the surface. Whoever was up there with their Weapon of Mortal Sin still hadn’t attacked me, even though they’d had the perfect opportunity. And not just now. They had another perfect opportunity before, while I was attacking the omega slime. What did they want?
“Be ready when you get to the surface,” Greed warned.
“Yeah…”

I leaped from the ravine back to the wide expanse of wasteland. Immediately, I spotted the man in black standing nearby. He wore a hood, and a skull mask eerily similar to my own covered his face. I had the strange sensation of being unable to recognize the man wearing it.
“His mask does the same thing mine does. That dirty copycat!”
The man held a black sword. He stood, unmoving, as he watched me. His sword was a very different shape from Greed. Its blade included a cylinder-like attachment.
“The weapon he wields,” said Greed, sensing my curiosity, “is Envy. A special weapon type called a gunblade. That cylindrical barrel fires magic bullets, and those bullets have tracing capabilities.”
“But that means…”
“Yep. That particular Weapon of Mortal Sin is an all-ranger, capable of both long and short-range combat.”
Are you serious? I guess that explains why he’s so calm.
I tried to use Identify to uncover exactly who I was facing, but it didn’t work. I could sense him smiling under his skull mask. He knew how to nullify the skill; whenever I tried to use it, he released a short burst of magical energy, clouding my vision.
We stood opposite each other, glaring with bated breath as we each waited for the other to attack. The man in black moved first. He slid his gunblade into its sheath, and with an exaggerated sweep of his arm and slightly quirked smile, he placed his hand on his chest and bowed.

The earth rumbled beneath my feet.
No way! Is this—?
It was just what I thought—and more. Three omega slimes burst from the ground and re-formed before me, their cores intact. Not only that, each was engraved with a seal, one I'd seen before. The monsters that so persistently attacked Lady Roxy's army in Galia had been marked with the same brand.
Greed grunted in disapproval, having just realized something he didn't like.
"That magic bullet he fired into the slime alongside your attack—it brought out the monster's latent potential. Now it's capable of dividing itself into parts with unique cores and exactly the same core stats. You killed one, but before you managed that, it had already cloned itself."
"That's not good, is it?"
"Well, as long as the effects of that magical bullet last, the slime can multiply an unlimited number of times. But, Fate, this is a bad matchup for you. It might even be the worst."
On that point, I had to disagree. I was still hungry.
I focused my energy and unleashed Gluttony's power once more. Then I readied the black bow and took aim at the man in black as he stood there, silently watching me like I was some kind of amusement.
I fired my greeting straight at him.

Chapter 26:
The Domain of E

WITHOUT SO MUCH as blinking, the man in black shot my arrow down from the sky with one of his black bullets. Of course it wouldn't be so easy, but I wasn't about to stop. I continued my assault so I could get a read on the gunblade's abilities.
"Damn it. These slimes are annoying!"
The omega slimes multiplied rapidly. There were nearly a hundred now. I didn't want to waste time on them when I could get to their source, but there were so many that I barely had anywhere to stand without threat of acid rain.
"They're seriously really, really annoying!"
The monsters entirely blocked my path to the man in black. I could see him through their massive, translucent blue forms. He had yet to move even a single step. He was so relaxed it was almost frightening. He figured I had no escape. But if he thought this fight over before it had even begun, he was in for a surprise.
This guy's taking me too lightly.
The omega slimes were on the attack. They moved in on me as one. I had nowhere to run. They were going to wrap me up and melt me into mush, drowning me in their corrosive acid.
"Fate!" Greed cried. "You have to fight back! Fate!"
My vision blurred with blue, but I shoved everything away and moved forward. My sights were set on the man in black, and I tore through the wall of omega slimes to get to him.
"Phew," I said. "That was a bit rough. I couldn't breathe."
"Fate…" Greed sputtered, "you've…you've mastered it already?"
"As only a Glutton can."
The ground I walked upon turned black and melted. Any omega slime that tried to attack me suffered the same fate. All thanks to the spell Corrosion. I annihilated the omega slimes with the spell I'd just stolen from their original. It was a numbers game. My magic stats surpassed theirs, so my magic was stronger.
"These slimes are nothing to me now."
The metallic voice rang in my head, informing me of my new stats.

Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +133,600,000, Strength +87,600,000, Magic +119,830,000, Spirit +112,480,000, Agility +53,470,000.

Now the real problem. In total, I'd just consumed more than a hundred million stats, courtesy of ten high-quality souls. This would be ten times more of a shock than eating a single omega slime.
It was bad. The flood of sensation reminded me of eating my first crowned beast, but this…this was much worse. The vision in my right eye flared bright red as Gluttony was unleashed within me. I clenched my teeth as blood dripped from my eye down my cheek. My own blood fell to the earth in crimson teardrops.
"I'm still…hungry…" I muttered.
"Don't get too greedy, Fate."
"We don't have a choice. We still have to hear that guy speak."
Even now, that bastard stood where he always had, unmoving as he watched me struggle. I thought I'd see some change in his demeanor when I consumed his slime brigade, but he hadn't even broken a sweat.
"He's waiting until you reach the point of no return. The point when you can't devour anything more. That's what the omega slimes are for."
"But my stats just grow."
"No, Fate. Whether your stats continue to grow depends entirely on you."
"What are you saying, Greed?"
Before I could ask again, the omega slimes launched another attack blocking my path.
I went on devouring the slimes through Corrosion, but I felt Greed was being unusually evasive. As the metallic voice echoed in my head, I grew stronger, even as waves of pain pummeled me. Gluttony's ecstasy ran rampant.
However, at the very limits of that feeling, by turns agony and utmost pleasure, came a strange sensation. At that limit, no matter how many omega slimes I devoured, the pleasure…dissipated. I wasn't satiated. I no longer felt Gluttony's ecstasy, only racking pain.
Why?
The metallic voice continued to drone in my head, reciting number after number, and yet I felt nothing.
This is impossible.
I pulled back on the black bow, filling it with every single stat of magical energy I had, and fired an arrow at the man in black. It was unlike any arrow I had ever shot, such was the power within it.
This time, the man in black didn't shoot my arrow down. He let the attack hit him.
"That's impossible…" My mouth was dry. All I tasted was ash.
The man in black took no damage whatsoever. He fixed the slant of his skull mask, which the blow had knocked slightly askew. The gesture sent a message*: Your attack was so insignificant that I need not respond.*
"Fate, look at your own stats using Identify," Greed urged.
When I did, my situation became clear.

Fate Graphite Lv 1
Vitality: 999,999,999
Strength: 999,999,999
Magic: 999,999,999
Spirit: 999,999,999
Agility: 999,999,999
Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Conceal, Night Vision, Brawl, Marksmanship, Strength Overload, Holy Sword Technique, One-Handed Sword Technique, Two-Handed Sword Technique, Bow Technique, Spear Technique, Fireball (Spell), Sandstorm (Spell), Hallucination (Spell), Corrosion (Spell), Strength Boost (Low), Strength Boost (Medium), Strength Boost (High), Vitality Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Medium), Vitality Boost (High), Magic Boost (Low), Magic Boost (Medium), Magic Boost (High), Spirit Boost (Low), Spirit Boost (Medium), Spirit Boost (High), Agility Boost (Low), Agility Boost (Medium), Health Regen, Fire Resistance

My stats were capped at nine digits. Did that mean that, no matter how much more I ate, they would never go any higher? Was I maxed out?
"This is the limit for humans," Greed said, answering my thought. "Past here, you enter a zone beyond human. A place called the Domain of E."
"The Domain of E… You mean…?"
I thought back to what Myne had said—that the Domain of E was where the Divine Dragon resided. She said it would take me ten years to get to the domain.
But what else was there?
Was I forgetting something? How could I break the barrier into the Domain of E? Did it have something to do with how I lost the ability to move when I saw the dragon?
"Fate, this is crucial. Listen carefully. There is an unsurpassable gap between those who are in the Domain of E and those who aren't."
"A gap…?"
"None of your attacks will work on someone in the Domain of E. Physical, magical, special…none will have any effect."
"That's why he shrugged off my arrow…?"
I transformed the bow into the black sword and cut down the attacking omega slimes as I waited for Greed's answer.
"Yeah. There's no doubt. This man is in the Domain of E."
As I stared at the man in black, he grinned. Deep within the two black eyes that stared out from his skull mask, I saw a glint of red. I knew that color so well that I hated it. They were eyes of intimidation, tinted scarlet, that brought to mind fresh blood. As they bored into me, I felt something grip and wrench at my heart. Fear, or hate, or hunger…

“Fate, know this. However sharp my blade, in the end, I am just a weapon, and I rely on the strength of the person who wields me. Remember what I said before. The growth of your stats depends on you.”
I gripped the black sword tighter. I didn’t have time to wait ten years. Whether I was ready or not, I was heading into the Domain of E.

Chapter 27:
Two Levels of Sacrifice

LET'S GO!

Pushing my stats to their new limit, I closed in on the man in black. Multiple omega slimes moved to block my path, but I only had eyes for one target. If I wanted to stop the omega slimes, I had to deal with him.

Despite that resolve, I needed to cut through the omega slimes to continue forward. With each slaughtered slime, the metallic voice ever-faithfully informed me of my increased stats, which remained capped.

I'm closing in, but he still hasn't moved even an inch… Well, how about this, then?

Using my forward momentum, I raised the black sword, and with everything I had, I brought it down upon the man in black. The air vibrated, but the man in black easily stopped the attack with his own blade.

Once again, a smile crept behind his mask. "You still don't get it, do you? This difference in our power? Everything you're doing is useless."

"Useless? My 'useless' attack gave me the chance to hear your voice."

The man in black didn't like my retort. He clicked his tongue and pushed back against my sword. His power surpassed everything I expected. In an instant, he threw me hundreds of feet, then hundreds more. I dug the black sword into the earth to create resistance and stop myself, but it wasn't easy. This bastard's strength was off the charts.

I looked ahead with hate in my eyes, only to see his gunblade pointed directly at me. I transformed Greed into the black shield just as I heard the echo of gunfire.

I blocked the attack, but the shock was enormous. The shots kept coming. With each bullet, the man in black pushed me farther backward. Farther and farther, until I was up against a huge cliff face.

"Gah!"

My back pushed violently into the jagged rocks. The blow sent fractures cracking in every direction. The wall crumbled around me. Gravity peeled me forward, and I crumpled to the ground, my body aching. I coughed blood. I didn't have a chance to wipe it from my face before the man in black stood before me.

What speed…

He was on a different level—from a different dimension in every conceivable way.

The man in black raised his gunblade and looked at me. A tremendous power charged through his body into his arm. The blade came down with blistering force, aimed straight for the top of my head.

I was at my limit. I trembled with pain, near the end. Greed couldn't save me now. I had nothing left but my desperation.

I didn’t care how much it cost. I didn’t care what I had to give up. I would give my everything. I would kill for it. I would die for it. With my last breath, I would sacrifice everything I had in exchange for ten years’ worth of experience.

The high-pitched shriek of metal on metal reached every corner of the Galian wastelands. The shockwave sent more fractures through the wall behind me, and the cliff face crumbled. Boulders fell from above like rain, one after another, but I no longer cared.

I didn’t have to. I gave everything, every last ounce of strength I had, and I was changed.

The man in black sensed my transformation, and his gaze moved from our clashing blades to my face.

“Those eyes! It’s impossible… Already?!”

“I unleashed it in its entirety,” I said, blood flecking from the corners of my mouth. “My Skill of Mortal Sin. Just like you.”

I felt a power unlike any I had ever known. It flowed through my body. At the same time, I pushed against the gunblade, forcing it backward.

So, this must be the Domain of E.

The world looked different. My senses, the depth of information, the very taste of the air—there was no other word to describe what I’d become but “superhuman.”

“You weren’t supposed to be there yet…” the man in black growled. Now that I had changed, so too had his tone.

“Well,” I said. “I got tired of waiting.”

Gluttony didn’t care for half-hearted resolve. If it took anything, it took everything, so I had offered it the very limits of my being—the two levels of ultimate resolve. I was ready to kill, and I was ready to die. With these two resolutions as a sacrifice, I had, for a time, complete control of Gluttony.

“I owe you my thanks,” I said. “Without you, I’d never have come this far.”

“Damn it,” the man snarled.

Now that I had reached the Domain of E, the millions of stats I’d inhaled earlier flooded into me. It seemed I had become the stronger of the two of us.

“Get ready!”

I planted my left foot firmly on the ground, transforming the earth beneath me as it cratered under the force. I shoved back against the man in black with all my strength. He leapt backward, unable to withstand the force. As he did so, the omega slimes around him moved like a shield.

With both my eyes stained red, the crowned slimes were nothing to me.

“Get out of my way!”

With a glare, I froze every omega slime within my field of vision. I had used the intimidating effect of my Gluttony, which better enabled the bearer to feast upon the shivering souls of the weak. I ran along a path made of cowering omega slimes. The man in black pointed the barrel of his gunblade toward me, preparing to attack from range.

Now, however, I could track the bullets he fired. I readied the black sword for another attack as I cut his bullets out of the sky. The man in black settled his sword into a middle guard to intercept me. We closed in on each other as we both searched for the right time to strike.
The black sword and the black gunblade seemed to merge as I evaded the man in black, and his blade cut deep into the earth. Dust and soil swirled around him, rising up and clouding my vision.
I aimed to impale both the skull mask and the man in black's face behind it. The man was a fearsome opponent. Without a doubt, his head was the best target. I readied my sword and drove it forward, the blade slicing through the dirt and directly toward the man's face.
At the last possible moment, the black gunblade parried my sword and sent it off course. Greed carved a chunk from the left side of the man in black's mask, and the strike sent me past him. I used the momentum to recover distance.
The man in black turned to face me. His skull mask's durability was spent, and it crumbled from his face. The power that hid the man's identity was gone, and the face that revealed itself was one that I knew only too well. After all, we'd met not so long ago. But I wouldn't have forgotten that face anytime soon, with its wavy blond hair and its fake smile, as much a mask as the skull had been.
"It was you all along, wasn't it? Northern Alistair." I spat.
I couldn't say I was surprised. I'd had a bad feeling about him the moment we met. He knew too much about Greed. Everything he said had reeked of lies, especially during our journey to the great canyon of Galia.
Northern lowered his hood to his shoulders and grinned. "Well, you're half-right," he said, with a chuckle, "but you're half-wrong too."
"Then I guess you'll be telling me what I got wrong. And soon."
"I'll just let you know up front, Corpse—I'm not nearly so kind or gentle as Eris. You see, I can do this too."
With his gun still pointed at me, Northern took a white whistle from inside his armor. He spun it on his finger for a moment, then chuckled and blew. A high-pitched tone echoed into the silence.
"What the hell was that?!"
Northern let the whistle drop back into his armor. "Oh, you'll know soon enough. Look to the skies—you'll see it flying there."
The skies? Flying? No way…
A gigantic shape manifested on the southern horizon, its face barely visible. I didn't need to see it in any greater clarity. I already knew exactly what it was from the eager, hungry pulsing of Gluttony.
"The Divine Dragon…"
"Indeed. The Heavenly Calamity itself. A beast so overwhelmingly powerful that some call it a herald of the gods." Northern pointed his gunblade to the sky and fired. "Well, enough playing around. It's time to begin. The Divine Dragon and I are going to kill *her*, and we'll give it everything we have. That

means you’re going to have to show me everything you’ve got. I’m looking forward to it—aren’t you?”
“Northern, you…” I snarled.
But I didn’t have any more time to waste on Northern, because the Divine Dragon’s course was set. The Heavenly Calamity was heading directly for Lady Roxy.

Chapter 28:
The Roar that Rules the Skies

I DIDN'T HAVE TIME to focus on Northern. He knew this too, and a sly grin rose to his lips. "I'd say you've got about, oh, thirty seconds. Think you can make it?"
"You insufferable bastard!"
The Divine Dragon was visible in all its glory, soaring through the sky above on six metal wings. It opened its mouth and turned toward Lady Roxy's army, settling on its target. There was only one choice in front of me: head west with all the speed I could muster.
Northern wasn't about to stand by and watch. He fired shot after shot, hundreds of black bullets all aimed at my back as I ran. I dashed forward, cutting them down as I went, but defending robbed me of my chance to use the black bow to slow down the Divine Dragon. That was probably Northern's intention, since it meant I had no choice but to keep moving west.
As I ran on, I felt awful magical energy flow from behind me.
Talk about going overboard!
A wavering, translucent blue blanketed the landscape—a literal wall of multiplying omega slimes. I heard giggling in the distance. For Northern, this was all some kind of sick game.
That dirty son of a—
"Fate!" Greed shouted. "More attacks incoming!"
Thanks to Greed's warnings, I was able to handle Northern's attacks from the rear while I cut down omega slimes and carved my path forward. I could make it. I just needed to make it a little farther…
Finally, I dove into the battlefield where Lady Roxy's army and the death parade were still locked in combat. The soldiers valiantly fought against orcs, gargoyles, and hideous monsters I had never seen before. But their morale slipped as fear gripped their hearts. They couldn't unsee the Divine Dragon approaching from the south.
However, none of them fled. Everyone continued to fight. Was it because the one who led them refused to back down? Or was it because they saw the end was near, now that the literal heavens bore down upon them? I didn't know, and at that moment, it didn't matter.
I had to focus on the thundering roar of the Divine Dragon. As the beast drew closer, its daunting shape cast a shadow across the lands. It was as though night fell on the battlefield.
Now that I had unleashed the very limits of my Gluttony, I could face off against the monster without suffering as I had before. My body didn't freeze. I moved as freely as usual, ready to greet my fellow citizen of the Domain of E.

What mattered now was whether I could successfully defend against the Divine Dragon's attack. The beast released a massive energy wave as it roared. The wave's force was extraordinary, and it obliterated the scorched earth of Galia as it tore toward the battle.

It incinerated the monsters on the southernmost edge of the battlefield. Orcs, gargoyles, even crowned beasts—none withstood the destructive power. The Divine Dragon's awesome roar was a weapon worthy of the herald of the gods.

Here, I would defy that strength.

"Greed!"

Now was the time to unleash the power I had earned after devouring Haniel—Greed's Third Level, the black shield.

As my sword transformed into the black shield, the full impact of the dragon's roar hit us. The force was unlike anything I had ever known, pushing through the black shield into both my arms and down my legs. It forced me backward, but I dug in. Somehow, I could bear this power.

The energy of the roar bashed into the shield, fractured into a rainbow of light, and dissipated into the air.

The soldiers standing behind me at first had no idea what was going on. Little by little, they understood that I'd protected them, and they cheered me on with raucous support.

Don't worry about any of that, I thought. Get out of here while you still can!

Just as I hoped I could relax, I felt a sudden, searing pain. A black bullet had pierced my right thigh.

"That bastard!" I cried.

I couldn't move while I defended against the Divine Dragon's attack. Northern had seen this as a prime opportunity to take pot shots. He didn't aim for my vital spots, just my leg, to draw out his fun that much longer. He really was despicable.

As I lost the ability to stand on that leg, the battle of power leaned in the dragon's favor. The energy beam pushed me backward, little by little. I struggled to hold my ground, but blood poured out the hole in my leg. The bullet had severed my nerves. The limb wouldn't respond.

My Health Regen stitched the wound back together, but too slowly. I didn't have enough time. At this rate, I wouldn't be able to withstand another attack.

However, others came to my aid. The soldiers behind me grabbed hold of my shield as they looked to protect me from the deadly bullets flying in from the east.

I knew these men. They were the soldiers I'd traveled with at the great canyon of Galia. I was grateful for their support, but their actions were far too reckless. The Divine Dragon was in the Domain of E. It existed on an entirely different plane. It would destroy them without a thought.

"Don't worry about me! Run! Get to safety!" I screamed.

But the soldiers didn't listen. They remained, though nobody had ordered them to. They moved of their own volition. Their support gladdened a small part of me, but the larger, smarter part knew what would happen next, and that knowledge was excruciating.

Northern was not kind or generous. He doubtless relished the situation he'd cornered me into. Another hail of bullets came, passing through the soldiers shielding me. Though these bullets only punctured my flesh, the stat differential overwhelmed the soldiers supporting me, and they burst apart. Their flesh exploded against my skull mask. Even then, the troops refused to turn and run. One by one, they fell. Their blood leaked from their ruptured bodies, pooling at my feet.

With each passing second, I prayed the dragon's shrieks would end, and then, finally, they did. The Divine Dragon dropped into silence. However, I knew it was preparing a second attack. The next would be stronger than the last.

This is bad…

Then I heard a girl's voice that was all too familiar to me. "What is happening here?!"

She had run over when she noticed the attack on her fallen troops. When she had seen the Divine Dragon push me back across the battlefield. I knew she'd come to help, because that was just who she was. Lady Roxy, a gallant knight in shining armor.

Her timing was awful. Just as she arrived, the Divine Dragon launched its second blast, locking me in place as I defended the battlefield from its roar. The force of it was overwhelming. It ripped the sleeves off my armor and sent cracks through my skull mask, which crumbled to little more than dust.

No! Northern will have his sights set on Lady Roxy. He'll be taking aim! I gritted my teeth. "That's the one thing that I will…not…allow!"

"Fate, you—"

Greed's shock lasted only an instant. The black shield began to transform, sapping my energy. It was an apocalyptic transformation, like that of the black bow and scythe. At the same time, the new great shield I held in my hands was something I knew how to handle without Greed having to explain it.

As the black shield devoured my stats, a blue flash of light burst out in waves around me. The Divine Dragon's mouth exploded. Its once-overwhelming roar suddenly transformed into a howl of agony. Northern's attacks ceased too.

"Never in a million years would I have expected you to reach the Third Level's special technique without my help," Greed laughed. "I'm shocked that you've come this far, Fate!"

"Shut up for a minute, will you?" I muttered. "It's not over yet."

While the Divine Dragon reeled from the damage it took, the troops had to evacuate, and quickly.

My skull mask was gone, though. I couldn’t turn to face anyone. My identity was no longer hidden, and Lady Roxy would know immediately who I really was. I knew I had to hurry, yet I faltered.
Lady Roxy called out to me quietly. “Fate… Is that you, Fay?”
Her voice, calling that name, tore at my heart. I nodded, but I kept my back to her.
“I knew it…” she continued, her voice a mixture of wonder and relief. “I knew it was you. Ever since the great canyon, I kept looking at Corpse and seeing…you. Seeing Fay. But I thought it was impossible. I thought…Fay…”

The time to reveal my secret had come. I had tried to put it off, but it was always going to be like this. Lady Roxy had seen my face when we fell into that cavern. She hadn't been fully conscious, so I told myself it was okay, but the moment had left an impact.

We'd come so far, but it was all over. I could no longer keep my secrets from her.

I heaved a great sigh, and I turned to face Lady Roxy, her eyes shining with the sincerity that defined her.

Chapter 29:
Decision Time

AFTER SHE CALLED MY NAME, Lady Roxy didn't speak. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that she couldn't.

With my Gluttony unleashed in its fully starved state, and my stats so far above her own, Lady Roxy was frozen, unable to move under the terrifying gaze of my crimson eyes. This unnatural power proved that I was an aberration. A freak.

I could see that Lady Roxy was trying to say something, but time wouldn't wait for her to regain control. There was no way to know when the Divine Dragon writhing behind me would recover.

I had deceived her all this time, and later, she could curse me to her heart's content. But first, I wanted to convey what had to be said.

"Please, take your troops and leave this battle. That beast won't stay quiet long, so I came to buy you time," I said. Then I added, "I'm sorry…for lying to you all this time, Lady Roxy. Thank you for everything."

It pained me, and it felt cowardly, to make this revelation into a one-sided conversation. As I turned once more to face the Divine Dragon, I realized that Lady Roxy's eyes had been wide open, her face stained with tears. What those tears meant, I didn't know. There was no need for me to know.

Released from the power of my scarlet eyes, Lady Roxy said nothing. Yet as she left, ordering her troops to fall back, I had the distinct sensation that she whispered my name once more.

As I dashed forward, the recovering Divine Dragon sprawled out across the wasteland. On its head, arms crossed, stood Northern Alistair. He perched on the beast's metal crest with a grin on his face as though he were above it all, a vain god looking down upon a world of mere mortals.

The Divine Dragon was indeed fearsome. Even after taking such extreme damage, it was healing, which meant I had to hit it before it fully recovered.

I transformed Greed into the black bow. Northern was dangerous. Almost more so than the beast, I needed to keep him constrained.

I launched countless arrows from every angle, all aimed at Northern. At first, he shot the arrows before they reached him, then he gave up and began cutting them down with the edge of his gunblade.

Why would he do that? If he could shoot all the arrows down, why would he bother using his blade?

Greed sensed my suspicions. "Looks to me like there's a limit to how many bullets he can fire in succession. If I think back, he left short gaps between his attacks earlier."

"Looks like it. But, Greed, why don't you know that already? You're both Weapons of Mortal Sin, right?"

“Envy is next generation. There’s a lot a first-generation weapon like me just doesn’t know. I only really understand the originals.”
“Seriously? Talk about unreliable.”
“You shut your mouth! Regardless of generation, Envy is a secretive, pompous ass. That puffed-up gunblade could learn a thing or two from watching the mighty Greed in action.”
Greed’s personality wasn’t all that different from Envy’s in my estimation, but now wasn’t the time to point it out. Not while we were in the midst of battle. I didn’t want the black sword getting bent out of shape either, so it was time to lift his morale.
“Then I’m glad I have you instead!”
“Really?” Greed said, and he laughed. “Yeah! Of course you are!”
He was simple at heart. And with this simple, delighted weapon gripped tight, I looked behind me to check the position of Lady Roxy’s army. They were beginning to retreat, so at least they had trusted my words.
That’s a relief… Now it’s time to take things up a notch.
“Fate, use it!” shouted Greed. “In your current state, it’s more than possible. Leave the finer details to me.”
“Let’s do it, then!”
I dove directly underneath the Divine Dragon, a position I knew would be within the area of effect.
I transformed the black bow back into the black sword, and through a combination of Greed and the orichalcum scabbard, I used Holy Sword Technique as a base to unleash a modified tech-art I called the Eternal Grand Cross.
I charged the black sword with all my magical energy. It began glowing with a holy light, signaling that the tech-art was ready. I twisted my wrist as if unlocking a door, triggering the tech-art.
Four giant crosses appeared above the head of the Divine Dragon, pulsing with light. In an instant, they fell and surrounded the monster, light circulating between them. The Divine Dragon roared, but the crosses wouldn’t allow it to move. This was the heart of Eternal Grand Cross: an endless prison of searing light.
Although it was a ranged skill, the Eternal Grand Cross had a low success rate, because you had to use it at close range. However, once it hit, no monster could escape. I hadn’t had great success with it among the orcs, but the combination of my starved state and the Domain of E increased its efficacy a hundredfold.
Trapped in the prison of the Eternal Grand Cross, the Divine Dragon would be weakened by constant damage.
Of course, victory was never going to come so easily for me.
Bullets rained down from above. I saw them coming and blocked them. As a follow-up attack, Northern brought his sword down on my head. I parried his strike with my own as we glared at each other.

“So many surprises,” spat Northern. “First, you unlock Greed’s Third Level attack, then you practically drive my cute little slimes to extinction, and now this nonsense tech-art I’ve never seen before. Don’t you feel sorry for the poor Divine Dragon? Won’t you be so kind as to release it to frolic back into the wild?”
“You slaughtered the kingdom’s army without mercy, and you have the gall to ask me to feel sorry for the Divine Dragon?”
“Those men are replaceable. Expendable. Even your precious holy knight. Well, actually, her existence has some value. We just won’t know exactly how much value until we kill her. But if it doesn’t go according to plan? Well, then we just set up the next one. The dragon, now, it’s one of a kind.” Northern pushed forward with his sword.
He’s still got such power…
Using the Third Level secret technique took a toll on my stats. Before I’d unleashed it, I was stronger than Northern, but now the tables had turned. Stats weren’t the only reason, either.
Northern saw it too, and a thin smile stretched over his face. “The three reasons for your downfall: One, you forced your way into the Domain of E, and now you’re hitting its limit. Two, maintaining this tech-art constantly saps your powers, doesn’t it? And three—*I’m just getting started.*”
I couldn’t resist Northern’s attack any longer. His power was overwhelming. Unable to bear his strength, I guided Northern’s gunblade toward the earth. As his sword struck the ground, the shock sent rocks exploding through the air. I saw an opening through the cascade of rocks and earth, and I seized the opportunity to slice toward Northern’s neck.
“Oh, *so* close!” Northern smirked as he nimbly backstepped and avoided the strike by little more than a hair.
“Don’t give him any space!” cried Greed. “Close that distance and stay on him!”
“Got it!”
I didn’t need to be told twice. I ducked in and stayed tight, swinging the black sword. Northern deftly evaded and parried my attacks. Then he tilted his head slightly in confusion.
“What’s this?” he said. “Your fighting style changed. I wonder why?”
As I threw my next attack, Northern blocked it and brought his face close to my own.
“Ah, now I get it. It’s because of *that*, isn’t it?” he said, glancing at the Divine Dragon, then back at me with another infuriating grin. “I’m right, aren’t I? Once you step outside a certain range, your fancy little tech-art stops working.”
He’d figured it out. That was why I had to stay close—couldn’t let him get far from me. To keep this modified tech-art working, I had to use Greed in his black-sword form. Swapping to the bow would cancel the Eternal Grand Cross. If Northern got away, I would have to choose between containing him and the dragon.

Northern read it on my face. In his mind, he had already won. “Your expression’s the only answer I need. I’m right on the money.”
“We’re not—done—yet.”
I desperately sliced toward Northern, trying to keep him in range as he attempted to retreat. However, Northern was waiting for exactly that desperation. He raised his gunblade. With a quick twitch of his wrist, the unnaturally sharp black edge severed my left arm, sending it flying behind me in an elegant, bloody arc.
For an instant, I felt nothing. My momentum carried me. In the following seconds, searing pain hit me. It sent a numbness through my brain. My legs could barely carry me. I fell to my knees, agonized. As I looked up at Northern, he looked at the sky, his smile splitting his face, poised like a warrior embracing his victory.
“Such a pity,” he said. “Eris had such high hopes for you. But you had to go and get in my way, didn’t you? Well, this is what you get for your troubles.”
With that said, Northern plunged his gunblade through my heart as I tried to stand.
That looked painful, I thought. Lucky I only lost my left arm.
The following cry of pain came, not from me, but from Northern himself as I plunged Greed through his back.
“What…but—how…?”
He stared at the blade of the black sword pushing through his chest in disbelief. He couldn’t understand how I now stood behind him. Blood poured from his mouth as he turned his head to me. I shoved the sword in deeper.
“You should have saved your celebration until you actually won,” I said.
I moved my eyes to the illusion of myself that Northern had skewered with his gunblade. I had no use for it anymore, and as I released the spell, my illusion dissipated into the air.
This sort of basic magic wouldn’t usually have fooled Northern. However, I’d seen a small window of opportunity if I convinced him that his victory was assured. It was my last and only chance, and it was an all-or-nothing gamble. Making it work had meant sacrificing a part of myself.
As I had promised, I’d given everything I had.
“You…you willingly let me…cut off your arm…?”
“I did. There was no way to win otherwise. But you know what?” This time, I wore the crooked grin. “I’ll give it to you. Take it with you to hell.”
With those words, I twisted the black sword and sliced Northern completely in half.

Chapter 30:
The Truth Approaches

I STARED AT NORTHERN'S severed corpse as a familiar metallic voice announced my victory.

Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +2.00e8, Strength +1.80e8, Magic +2.10e8, Spirit +2.40e8, Agility +1.40e8.

Huh, I thought. This is what stats in the Domain of E look like. But… Northern doesn't have any skills?

The world went hazy as Gluttony erupted into ecstasy. As I fell into the familiar black, I couldn't help but feel there was something strange about Northern Alistair, even in his death.

When I came to, I stood in a space of pure white. I recollected only that I had been here once before. I tried to remember when, but I couldn't seem to grasp it. The world was just white as far as I could see.

As I tried to sort through my memories, a girl suddenly appeared before me. The girl was also white, dressed in white, with white hair—identically white to the world around her. It was as though she were part of it.

She looked at me, and she sighed. "I told you not to be so reckless… I'm about to hit my limit."

The girl pointed to the ground at her feet, and underneath, I faintly made out a darkness. In that darkness lay a countless number of creatures—deformed, wounded, groaning in malice and hatred. I knew instinctively that this darkness was a place of overwhelming fear, and in that moment, I remembered. I had seen this place in my dream. I remembered the girl too.

"You're…the girl in the core of Haniel…"

"That's right," she said, breaking into a smile. "I'm glad we finally have a chance to properly talk. I'm Luna, and I have to thank you."

I tilted my head, confused. "Thank me?"

"I want to thank you," Luna said, looking at me with sincerity, "for killing me."

I had no words. I didn't have any idea how to reply. Our battle had haunted me ever since I left it. I had been uncertain whether I had really done the right thing by ending her life, monstrous as it had become. I wasn't sure of anything anymore—only that I wanted to protect Lady Roxy. Was it okay to be glad that I'd killed someone?

"Don't look like that," Luna said. "I'm happy, honestly. I'm happy things ended as they did."

"But I…I just…I can't say I'm happy that it happened."

“A bit stubborn, aren’t you? Even having heard what I think. Although, given what I’ve witnessed of you and your actions from in here, I can’t say I didn’t see that coming.”
Luna said this with a slight smile, as though she knew all about me already. As though we were friends of some sort. I felt a bit like she’d invaded my privacy. Her speaking so openly about my innermost emotions, and her straightforward manner…more than anything, she reminded me of Myne. Her face, too, looked somehow similar to Myne’s.
“But really,” Luna continued, “I’m happy. Satisfied, too. Thanks to you, I also got to see my big sister again.”
“Big sister?! Wait—you and Myne are sisters?” *Well, that explains the similarities*.
Luna giggled at the startled look on my face. “It’s not what you’re thinking.”
“Huh? What do you mean?” I tilted my head.
I couldn’t work it out. If she hadn’t meant they were sisters, then what in the world did she mean? But it didn’t look like Luna was about to tell me any more than she had. Mysteriousness seemed to be a Galian trait all around.
“Anyway, aren’t there more important things you want to ask me about?” Luna said, gesturing to the world of white that surrounded us.
“Oh. Yeah. What is this place?”
“Well, I suppose you can think of it as a spiritual plane where Gluttony deposits the souls of those it devours. I used my power to create this quiet part.”
“Hm…”
“You don’t get it, do you? I can see confusion written all over your face! You’re going to hurt yourself thinking so hard. Well, just so you know, the whole reason your Gluttony has had a harder time breaking free and running wild lately is because I created this space for you. *Now* do you get it?”
Whoa…
When I thought back, it was true that ever since I had devoured Haniel’s soul, Gluttony had been oddly quiet. Even though I’d worked diligently to control the hunger through training, something about the suddenness of the change had struck me as strange. Now, I finally had an explanation.
In all my wondering, I never could have imagined that a soul I devoured would protect me.
“But why have you done all this?” I asked.
“I already told you,” Luna said. “I’m grateful you killed me. This is my way of saying thanks. However…I can’t hold on much longer. It looks like I can’t be your bastion.”
Luna stared sadly at the world she had created, her clear white eyes turning a bright red, just as they had been stained when I’d first seen her. As that crimson leaked in, her world began tearing apart at its edges.

“You shouldn’t devour the Divine Dragon,” she said. “If you do, my power can no longer help you. You will become something other than what you are now. It’s inevitable.”
No matter what it cost me, I knew that I couldn’t stop. I had to ask Luna how to get out of this plane, back into the world. But as I began to do so, the white ground split around my feet, and holes opened into the darkness below.
“Whoa!”
Just as I was about to fall into the dark pit, crowded with the howling souls of the damned, a hand reached out and grabbed me. It belonged to a man I’d never seen before. He was tall, a bit handsome, and he looked older than me. He sported a striking head of red hair and a set of Galian tattoos.
“Jeez,” the man said with an arrogant air as he hoisted me back up. “I wondered why you weren’t replying. You’ve just been hanging out in here, huh? You know there’s only so much I can do on my own, right? The Divine Dragon’s about to break loose.”
“Wait,” I said, still disoriented from meeting Luna, from the fall, from *everything*. “I know that voice. You’re not—Greed?!”
“The one and only! This is my temporal form. But don’t go thanking me as your savior just yet—thank Luna. She’s the one who called me here.”
Greed gestured to Luna, and a flash of annoyance crossed his face. I wondered whether he and Luna knew each other; he didn’t look like he wanted to be here much longer.
Still, I’d only ever known Greed as a weapon. It was refreshing to see him in a form with visible expressions, and I took a moment to study him.

“Hey,” Greed said, crossing his arms. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s rude to stare?”
“Wait, Greed, did you…did you used to be human…?”
“Does that even matter right now? C’mon. Let’s go, Fate. We’re running out of time.”
He was right. And it looked like Greed knew how to get me out of here.
“Greed, I need your help.”
“Of course you do,” he snorted. “That’s the whole reason I’m down here.”
I turned to Luna. “I have to defeat it. The Divine Dragon. Now that it’s lost its master, I can’t just let it go.”
Luna remained silent, but after a moment, she nodded.
Greed reached out a hand, and I grasped it with my own. The two of us were wrapped in light, and…
When I came to, I was back on the battlefield in Galia. In my right hand, I clasped the black sword.
“We’re back…” I muttered.
“Of course we are,” Greed said dismissively. His voice had returned to the imperious echo I accessed through Telepathy. *“And look at all the trouble I had to go to just to get you!”*
“I’m sorry.”
The light crosses still trapped the Divine Dragon in the air, but the bindings were growing thin, and they looked near the breaking point. It was just a matter of time before they failed.
I looked down at Northern’s corpse. Even though I’d devoured his soul, I’d gained nothing but his stats. Why hadn’t I received any skills? It shouldn’t have mattered that he bore a Skill of Mortal Sin, should it?
“He was just a puppet,” said Greed, reading my thoughts. “The real culprit was Envy. I never would have imagined Envy was equipped with that kind of ability. The ability to control people… But I guess it comes with the territory, when I think about it.”
“If that’s the case, we can’t just leave Envy like this.” I raised the black sword high, preparing to shatter the black gunblade.
“It’s useless,” Greed said, stopping me before I struck. “Don’t bother. Weapons of Mortal Sin are indestructible. We can’t be broken, even by our kin.”
“But it’s only going to be a nuisance if we leave it here.”
Instead of trying to break Envy, I swung the black sword like a club and sent the gunblade flying deep into the depths of the Galian region. I figured Envy would have a hard time finding another human puppet out that far in the wilderness, and any monsters it tried to control would be killed on sight in Seifort.
The gunblade quickly disappeared from view.
“That, uh, that went much farther than I expected,” I said.
Greed cackled. “Oh man, I can just picture it! Envy flying through the air all vexed. Completely humiliated! Marvelous work, Fate. Splendid!”

As if cued by his glee, the cross binding overhead broke. The light flared, then snapped as the dragon launched itself back into the sky. It was time to deal with the Divine Dragon.

Now that it had lost its master, the monster was crazed with rage. It lashed out at anything around it. If I left it as it was, there was every chance that, in its madness, it would turn toward Babylon and attack at full force.

“Let’s do this, Greed!” I shouted.

It was time to go wild one last time. I would use all the power I had to take this ruler of the skies and bring it down to earth.

In that moment, I felt an odd sensation, like I could achieve anything I wanted.

Chapter 31:
To Feast

THE DIVINE DRAGON opened its mouth wide and gathered a charge for another roaring blast. It faced Babylon. Even now, it was still trying to follow its master's last orders.

Not if I could help it.

"Hey, Greed, you ever want to know what it feels like to fly?"

"Huh?! What are you talking about?!"

I didn't answer. Instead, I launched Greed like a javelin. I gave the throw everything I had, aiming at the Divine Dragon's lower jaw. Greed shouted something as he left my grasp, but I figured whatever he had to say at this point couldn't be very important.

Usually, I would never have done anything so reckless, but without my left arm, wielding the black bow was no longer an option. Even with Health Regen, it seemed like growing an arm back was impossible for a human. I glanced at the ragged stump and was glad to see the bleeding had stopped. I could still feel my arm where I had none, perhaps because it was still such a recent injury.

Greed carved a black line through the air and slammed the Divine Dragon's mouth completely shut mere moments before it roared. An instant later, with nowhere else to go, the roar exploded inside the beast's mouth. The shock tilted the Divine Dragon, and it dropped slightly from the sky.

Yes! I should be able to reach it at this distance.

I sent the earth around me flying as I kicked off, jumping toward the Divine Dragon like a bullet aimed at the bottom of its jaw.

I charged power into my right fist and loaded up the skill Brawl's tech-art, Ruinous Strike. However tough the Divine Dragon's skin, it didn't matter to me; this tech-art would destroy it from the inside.

I punched the Divine Dragon with all my might. Its skin puffed up around my fist, then burst open in a rain of vivid flesh. The momentum of the strike sent me higher. Within the scattered flesh of the still-living dragon, I glimpsed the black sword. I used the Divine Dragon's bottom jaw as a foothold and lunged to grasp Greed in my hand.

"Welcome to your destination, Greed. You had a pleasant flight, I hope?"

"Fate…you better remember this. If you ever, ever think you can use the mighty black sword Greed like some kind of throwaway javelin again…"

"I got you back, didn't I?"

"That's not the problem!"

Greed was right. That *wasn't* the problem. The problem was the Divine Dragon, still alive and reaching for me with one of its monstrously thick claws. I deftly dodged out of its way and used Identify on the monster.

The Heavenly Calamity
Divine Dragon, Lv 1,500
Vitality: 2.10e8
Strength: 1.80e8
Magic: 2.10e8
Spirit: 2.90e8
Agility: 1.50e8
Skills: Vitality Boost (Ultra), Magic Boost (Ultra), Spirit Boost (Ultra), Health Regen Boost

As I expected, the Divine Dragon was in the Domain of E. It was the first monster I'd seen with a level higher than three digits, too.
Three of the Divine Dragon's skills were ultra-high status-boosting skills. I'd acquired a high-boost skill, so "ultra" was clearly the next level. All the same, stat boosters were most effective when you leveled up. They did boost base stats, but they weren't particularly delicious skills for someone like me, who was eternally Level 1. That said, collecting the whole set of stat boosters was something I'd looked forward to, like a little personal goal. I wondered whether ultra was the limit, or if there was a stat booster that surpassed even that. Not that it really mattered anymore.
The Divine Dragon also had the Health Regen Boost skill. That was probably how it had stayed in the air even after taking such a vicious attack to its head and body. It was at least one step above my own Health Regen. I wanted to use Identify to check the skill out in more detail, but the Divine Dragon was done waiting.
The beast reached out for me once more with its claws, but I sliced at it while I asked Greed something that was on my mind.
"Why doesn't the Divine Dragon freeze under the power of Gluttony's gaze?"
"Even if your stats are higher, that won't work on any enemy in the Domain of E. Like I said, it's a world beyond human. A lot of things are different now."
"More's the pity…"
I leaped onto the Divine Dragon's forward limb, then dashed toward its back. The monster twisted violently like it was trying to get rid of a pesky flea, but I had no intention of going down so easily. I had my sights on the very thing that kept the Divine Dragon airborne: its shining set of six wings. I sent each wing plummeting to the earth with a slice of my blade, and with each lost wing, the Divine Dragon dropped farther. This was a monster sometimes referred to as a herald of the gods. Some of the population even worshipped it. I reduced it to a shell of what it once was.
"You're the one who's going down!" I cried, slicing off the Divine Dragon's last wing and kicking it toward the earth with all my strength.
The dragon had lost its ability to maneuver in the air. It was little more than a sitting duck. Unlike the regeneration abilities chimeras possessed, Health

Regen Boost wouldn't regrow the dragon's crushed jaw, shattered flesh, and wingless stumps. That worked for me. I didn't want to have to deal with the beast flying through the air again.
As we careened downward in freefall, I gripped Greed tight in my remaining hand. Even without its lower jaw, the Divine Dragon prepared to launch another energy beam. Just as I saw the giant beast as a target, it now recognized that I was powerless to dodge any attacks as I fell through the sky.
"Fate!" Greed cried, ever my faithful alarm.
"Don't worry! I'm on it!"
As the Divine Dragon roared another energy beam toward us, I engaged the Strength Overload skill and the tech-art Sharp Edge. Strength Overload doubled your strength at the cost of dropping your strength stat to ten percent of its total for a whole day after use. It was risky, but perfect in a pinch. And this was it—my last strike.
When I'd multiplied my stats in the Domain of E, the Sharp Edge Tech-art had become overwhelmingly powerful—enough to slice the Divine Dragon's attack into pieces. The energy beam broke in two halves around me, dissipating into particles of light. My attack didn't stop there; it continued straight through the sky and sliced the Divine Dragon in half, too.
My attack was of such power that it carved into the Galian wasteland itself, cutting a deep ravine in the earth below. Into that dark abyss, the two halves of the Divine Dragon fell, as if from heaven into the depths of whatever awaited in the darkness beneath the earth.
It was finally over. As I tumbled toward the ground, I heard a familiar metallic voice.

Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +2.10e8, Strength +1.80e8, Magic +2.10e8, Spirit +2.90e8, Agility +1.50e8. Skills added: Vitality Boost (Ultra), Magic Boost (Ultra), Spirit Boost (Ultra), Health Regen Boost.

With the Divine Dragon now dead, there was nothing to naturally cull the monsters in Galia. Still, the enormous chasm that now ran across the earth would lessen at least some of the burden on the defenders of Babylon. It wouldn't be easy for any monster without wings to make it across this barren wound and into the lands of the kingdom.
Abruptly, an unbearable pain unlike anything I had ever known assaulted me. Gluttony's bliss exceeded my limits, warping into horrific agony. It was more powerful than Luna could ever hope to control. Trying to resist the crazed energy made me feel like I would burst into a shower of blood.
It was only a matter of time, now. Before I lost myself entirely, there was still one thing left to do. I could tell it was possible. I'd done it three times before, and I knew what it felt like.
His conditions were met.

“Greed,” I said. “I’m sorry…”
“Fate! Wait! Stop!”
“I can’t…I can’t hold on any longer…”
It had worked. I could tell from Greed’s haste. Unlocking a new level required my permission, and I had given it. I released the stats from within me, and the power poured out of me in a forceful rush. At the same time, Greed was wrapped in light as his form changed before my eyes.
What appeared as the light faded was an elegant black stave. I wanted to look at it more closely, but I couldn’t. I could barely even keep hold of it. Gluttony made my hand shake. As the stave dropped from my grasp, Greed’s voice faded from my mind.
“Not you too…”
It was an unusual tone for Greed, tinged with loneliness.
With Greed’s Fourth Level released, I was reduced back to my base stats. It would be all too easy for any adventurer or monster to kill me. Still, there was always the chance they wouldn’t. The chance that I would manage to kill someone and grow more powerful, a red-eyed monster in the wastes. Before I lost myself completely to Gluttony, I wanted someone to end it for me decisively.
As if to allay my fears, a girl appeared, walking toward me from the south. She had white hair and tanned skin, and she carried on her shoulder a giant black axe.
It was Myne. She had come to keep her promise.

Chapter 32:
The End of the Journey

MYNE WALKED UP TO ME as I knelt on the ground, drowned in waves of Gluttony. I couldn't even bring myself to stand. Her eyes were the same deep, fearsome red I remembered, but besides her piercing wrath, there was something lonely in her expression. She raised her axe up high as I knelt before her.

"I told you…" she said. "I told you not to meddle with the Divine Dragon."

"I didn't have a choice."

It was true; Myne *had* warned me this could happen. But I had come this far because I wanted to protect Lady Roxy, and now that I had, I could leave without regret. I felt refreshed and free, somehow. My heart no longer feared death.

"Please…" I said.

If I was going to die, I wanted to die while I was still me. My eyes poured hot blood, spattering the ground in front of me, and my vision was scarlet. Any moment now, I knew I could lose myself to Gluttony.

Even so, for what felt like a long time, Myne didn't move. Finally, she spoke. Her voice was quiet. "As you wish."

With the last shreds of my energy, I looked up at her. Whatever doubt had been in Myne's eyes before, it was all but gone now. I felt guilty asking her to do the dirty work for me, but there was nobody else I could entrust it to.

I closed my eyes.

I ran through my memories in my mind—where I had come from, and each step I had taken to arrive here. I saw where my journey had started, the time when Lady Roxy saved me from the Vlericks. I saw the tavern where I was just another local, and the barkeep who greeted me on each visit. Then, when I began my chase after Lady Roxy on her expedition for Galia, I saw the ruins of the village I had once called home.

I also saw the Blessed Blade, Aaron. I had promised him I would visit upon my return, but that had become a promise I could no longer keep. I felt saddened at the thought that I would not be able to see the city of Hausen returned to its former glory.

Then I saw my experiences in Galia, where I once again encountered Lady Roxy in the sentinel city of Babylon.

I had no regrets.

Now, I could tell that my journey had reached its end. I felt my consciousness begin to slip away.

"Myne, hurry!" I said, my voice breaking.

I felt the killing intent of Myne's axe. The time had come. If I could ask for only one thing, I thought, it would be to hear Lady Roxy's voice…to see her face…just one last time.

“You can’t!”
As a sudden new voice rang in my ears, I felt myself tumble toward the earth and roll across the ground.
I knew that voice!
When I opened my eyes, I saw her: Lady Roxy. She held me tight, the two of us covered in dirt, blood, and dust.
“What are you…what are you doing?!” Lady Roxy cried.
“Lady Roxy…” I rasped. “I…”
I had never imagined she’d run back onto the battlefield, ready to face the Divine Dragon to find me, but that was really just a lack of imagination on my part. Of course Lady Roxy Hart was the kind of person who would never let me fight on my own. Once she’d seen her troops to safety, she had returned.
And once again, her timing was horrible.
Now she saw me how I had never wanted her to see me: at my worst. Starving, broken. It was the one thing I had wanted to avoid.
“I…I could never hate you, Fay! You are who you are, with scarlet eyes or without! You don’t have to do this!”
Lady Roxy’s tears fell upon my cheek. With their heat, I felt a warmth and peace that I had, for a time, forgotten. I’d been so, so scared—so terrified all this time that, because of my Gluttony, she would grow to hate me. But she had seen my power, my frenzy, and the true depths of my skill, and despite everything, she accepted me. To her, I was still the person she had always known. Fate Graphite.
I didn’t know whether it was because of Lady Roxy’s acceptance or my peace of mind, but the frenzy of Gluttony began to calm. I’d surpassed its limits, and it was at a point where I could no longer stop or control it, yet Gluttony and its hunger fell suddenly, frighteningly quiet.
“What…is this…?” I whispered.
As I tried to puzzle through the extraordinary silence, Lady Roxy reached her hand out to me.
“Come on, Fay,” she said. “Let’s head back to Babylon, shall we?”
Her kind face brought to mind a memory I couldn’t forget. It felt like a lifetime ago, when I’d been a mere gatekeeper at the walls of Seifort. After she saved me from Rafale Vlerick’s abuse, Lady Roxy had reached out a hand and looked at me in the same caring way she did now.
In that moment, I realized. This whole way, every step of my journey, I had claimed that I wanted to save Lady Roxy, to protect her—but the truth was that I wanted her to protect *me*, just like she had on that day that felt so long ago. I’d wanted her to save me, this contemptible human made wretched by his Gluttonous Skill of Mortal Sin. How had I made it so far ignoring this hope, now so clear and simple?
I could no longer hide my feelings for Lady Roxy.
I fell into her arms as my consciousness faded.

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From somewhere distant, I heard Luna's voice echo.
"So, you found your true bastion..."
When I tried to ask her what she meant, I found myself staring at the ceiling from a bed. I realized I had been asleep. I was in a room I knew well—my room at the inn I'd called home since I first arrived in Babylon.
I tried to get up, but I crumpled to my left. Then I remembered. In the battle with Northern—Envy's puppet—I'd lost my left arm. I looked down at my side to find it was neatly bandaged. By the looks of things, Lady Roxy had seen to my injuries after everything was over.
I looked around, but the room was empty. I stared at the clock hanging on the wall.
"It's eleven in the morning…"
Judging by the time, more than a day had passed. Then I realized something was missing. Greed wasn't anywhere in the room. Where was he? Where had he gone? Where was the ever-boastful, mighty Greed?!
I pushed myself out of bed and turned the entire room upside down, but the sword was nowhere to be found. I grew pale at the thought that the black sword might be rolling around somewhere, lost in the depths of Galia…
There was a knock at the door. It opened, and in walked the blue-haired Eris and the white-haired Myne. With two bearers of Skills of Mortal Sin standing before me, I felt immense power fill the small room.
"Ah, so he finally wakes," said Eris.
"After one whole week," Myne said. "You sleep too much."
A whole week?! Then again, by the time that battle was over, I had been pretty much at death's doorstep, so the timeline did make some sense.
Then I saw the black stave held casually in Eris's hand.
"Greed?!" I cried.
"Yes, we finally got him back from Galia. Myne forgot to fetch him after your battle." Eris cast a sidelong glance at Myne, who pointedly ignored her. Eris sighed and went on. "Not only that, but apparently some monster got hold of Greed and carried him off somewhere. A harrowing experience that took him all the way to the heart of Galia."
Eris cast another glance in Myne's direction, but Myne was intent on ignoring her completely. It was very much in character for Myne, yet I got the feeling that these two just didn't get along very well. I hoped they wouldn't come to blows. In my current state, between these two, I'd probably end up asleep for another whole week.
I took Greed from Eris with a shaky, nervous hand. He was in his Fourth Level form, and the stave felt different from any of the other weapon types—almost delicate. It was detailed in a way that seemed decorative, so I didn't think it would work at all like a club. As I turned it over in my hand, Greed came through loud and clear to make his feelings known.

“FATE! You idiot! You absolute moron! How could you do something so reckless?!”
“Don’t be mad,” I said. “All’s well that ends well, eh?”
Greed was infuriated, despite my apologies. He lectured and he shouted, and at one point I thought he would deafen me with his howling.
When he was finally done, he added, “I was carried in the jaws of that monster forever! That journey was so harrowing that I thought I’d never make it back!”
“So it seems.”
“In any case…there’s something important you have to know. You should ask Eris about it.” Greed’s voice was suddenly serious, and I felt him urge me to turn toward Eris.
When I did, she looked at me with a bright smile. “So, you killed the Divine Dragon. In doing so, you showed me proof. I didn’t think you were ready yet, but since Roxy is alive, and the crowned-human experiment is over, we need your power. Actually, we need your help.”
“Help with what?” I asked hesitantly.
“Well, you probably won’t have a choice in the matter. As another bearer of a Skill of Mortal Sin, it’s unavoidable. But before that, we have to return your arm to what it was. Without it, things will only be harder for you.”
Huh?! You can do that?! Recovery magic isn’t that powerful, is it? Is it even possible to heal what isn’t there anymore?
Eris’s words defied the logic of everything I knew, but she went on.
“Yes, it’s possible to restore your arm,” she said. “But we have to leave before Roxy gets back. It’s much too dangerous for you to see her as you are.”
For some reason, the mere mention of Lady Roxy’s name made my Gluttony growl in a way that it hadn’t before. I had a very bad feeling about that.
Myne, who had been silent through Greed’s lecture and Eris’s request, held something out for me to take. “Here…” she said. “It’s your trademark.”
She handed me the crumbling remains of my old skull mask. *Trademark, huh?*
All the same, I put it on and got ready to leave. However, I made sure to write a letter before I did.
The letter contained all the things I wanted to tell Lady Roxy. It was composed of words I wanted to say myself, but…
I believed Eris when she said it was better for us not to meet. Not yet.

Chapter 33:
A Letter from Fate

ROXY'S POINT OF VIEW

THE UNBELIEVABLE BATTLE finally came to an end with the fight against the Heavenly Calamity, the Divine Dragon.

It had begun with a death parade. The sirens of the sentinel city of Babylon spurred us to action, and the kingdom's army marched toward our border with Galia.

Just before that, I had sparred with a certain skull-masked adventurer known as Corpse. I was certain he was the man Aaron Barbatos had told me of, a mysterious adventurer who carried a black sword. When I looked at Corpse, I saw the young man whose future Aaron was so concerned for. Corpse struggled with a power he couldn't control, a power so great that it threatened to consume him. When I journeyed to the great canyon of Galia, I first noticed it when Corpse coincidentally came to travel with us. It made itself clear in our battle with the chimeras.

However, outside battle, Corpse was gentle and sincere. He reminded me of someone I knew—so much so that I once murmured his name without realizing.

Fay…

But Fate didn't carry such power. He was a servant at the Hart family estate, safely back in Seifort. With those two beliefs in mind, I refused to conclude that Corpse and Fate were linked. Later, I realized that was only because I had seen them in the way I wanted to see them.

If I had only realized sooner…then events might not have unfolded as direly as they did.

As my troops and I fought against the death parade, the Divine Dragon appeared. In the face of its overwhelming power, I was ready to join my father in honorable death. The roar of the monster sent an energy beam across the lands, disintegrating the creatures in its deadly path as it cut toward my army. Just as all hope was lost, Corpse arrived as if from nowhere. He placed himself between my troops and the Divine Dragon. Corpse carried with him a black shield, which he used to hold off the roar of the beast. His actions awed the entire army, myself included. Not a single one of us had believed it possible to defend against an attack from such a monster, and none of us ever imagined someone could do it alone.

I hurried toward Corpse as if drawn to him. Then his mask, damaged in the battle, fell from his face. When I saw his face, I knew. I finally confirmed the suspicion I'd pushed down for too long.

The adventurer Corpse was indeed Fate Graphite.

In his red-stained eyes, I saw fear. I knew by his expression—and how he looked at me—why he had used his mask to hide who he really was. He was afraid that no one could ever accept him for what he had become.

I wanted to tell him that it wasn't true. Trapped in the gaze of his red eyes, however, my body refused to move, and I couldn't even squeeze out a whisper. I despised my inability to take action. It was like I was seeing Fate leave for someplace far, far away, and I was powerless to do anything more than watch as tears streamed down my face.

Even after he turned his back and released me, I couldn't follow him as he moved toward the Divine Dragon. I reached out because I wanted to say, *Please, wait for me, Fate*.

In the distance, I saw the Divine Dragon. Fate stood before it and fought without hesitation. But I couldn't bring myself to take a single step forward. I could only retreat to preserve the lives of my soldiers.

In that moment, I became painfully aware of my own powerlessness. The world in which Fate fought his battles was somewhere further than I could ever reach.

Right there, I made up my mind. I would focus on doing what was still within my control. I would start with Fate's suggestion and evacuate the kingdom's army. I searched for the commanders scattered across the battlefield and gave them their orders: retreat to Babylon, and give Fate room to fight his battle.

When the troops made it through the gates of Babylon, we watched in awe as the Divine Dragon plummeted from the sky. We witnessed the end of the Heavenly Calamity, a beast we had long thought invincible, an act of the gods that we could only ever flee.

That joy only lasted a moment. I felt a worrying pang in my heart as the dragon stilled, and I rushed back to find Fate. I was shocked and saddened by what I found, though I knew Fate must have his reasons for seeking death.

Yet I wanted to know what those reasons were. I wanted to share his burden, to let him know that he wasn't alone.

After the battle with the Divine Dragon, I brought Fate to the medical facilities of the Military Sector to have his wounds tended. He slept in a bed there. Once a full week had passed, he still showed no sign of waking. He had lost his arm in that battle. Looking at his wounded side filled me once more with a feeling of helplessness.

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Once my duties for the day were done, I walked through the medical facilities to check on Fate. As I did, I noticed something different about the soldiers there. They were all looking toward the ceiling, as if their souls were elsewhere. Even when I called to them, they replied as if lost in a daze.

“What in the world is going on here?” I asked.
I opened the door to Fate’s room with worry in my heart.
Fate’s bed lay empty.
“No… Why…?”
I frantically checked the rest of the facilities, but Fate was nowhere to be found. All I could find was a letter, addressed to me, that sat on the small table by Fate’s bed.
My hands shook as I picked it up. I was afraid of what it would say. If it contained parting words, I didn’t know what I would do. But I knew I had to face the words, whatever they said, so I took a deep breath and steadied myself.
I opened the neatly folded letter and let my eyes scan the words inside.
The contents of Fate’s letter shared all that had happened before he arrived in Galia, and all that had happened after. He told me that he had lied to me, and that he was the one at the center of the chaos at the northern canyon on the Hart family estate. He had damaged the valley to kill the raiding kobolds. He also said he had killed the holy knight Hado Vlerick, who was buying trafficked “forsaken” children so he could torture them to death. That was likely not the only foul deed Hado had committed, as the Vlericks were behind my assignment to Galia.
As I read Fate’s letter, I sensed that each lie he’d told pained him. Although he said that it hid his identity, I felt that the skull mask Fate wore was also a way for him to run from what he thought of himself.
Fate also wrote in detail of his Skill of Mortal Sin, Gluttony, and how it differed from other skills because of its dangers. It had awakened back when bandits attempted to sneak into the castle, all that time ago, which meant I had been present.
I’d never realized a thing.
Gluttony hungered for the souls of the living, and its bearer had to feed it periodically in order to live. Fate wrote that, if his Gluttony broke free, he would end up as he had been at the end of the battle with the Divine Dragon —ravenous and uncontrolled. Because his Gluttony was still unstable, he said it was impossible for us to meet again anytime soon. It made me worry that he would forever be wandering, with no place to call home, all because he had been born with this skill.
Finally, Fate wrote that, when his skull mask was no longer necessary, he would find me and apologize in person.
“Fay, it’s okay. Y-you can’t carry something so heavy all on your own. I just want to say thank you. That’s all I want to do… Why do you have to be so far away…?”
My feelings overwhelmed me, and I scrunched the letter in my hand.
Still, if Fate said he would one day come to find me, then I would wait for that day to arrive.

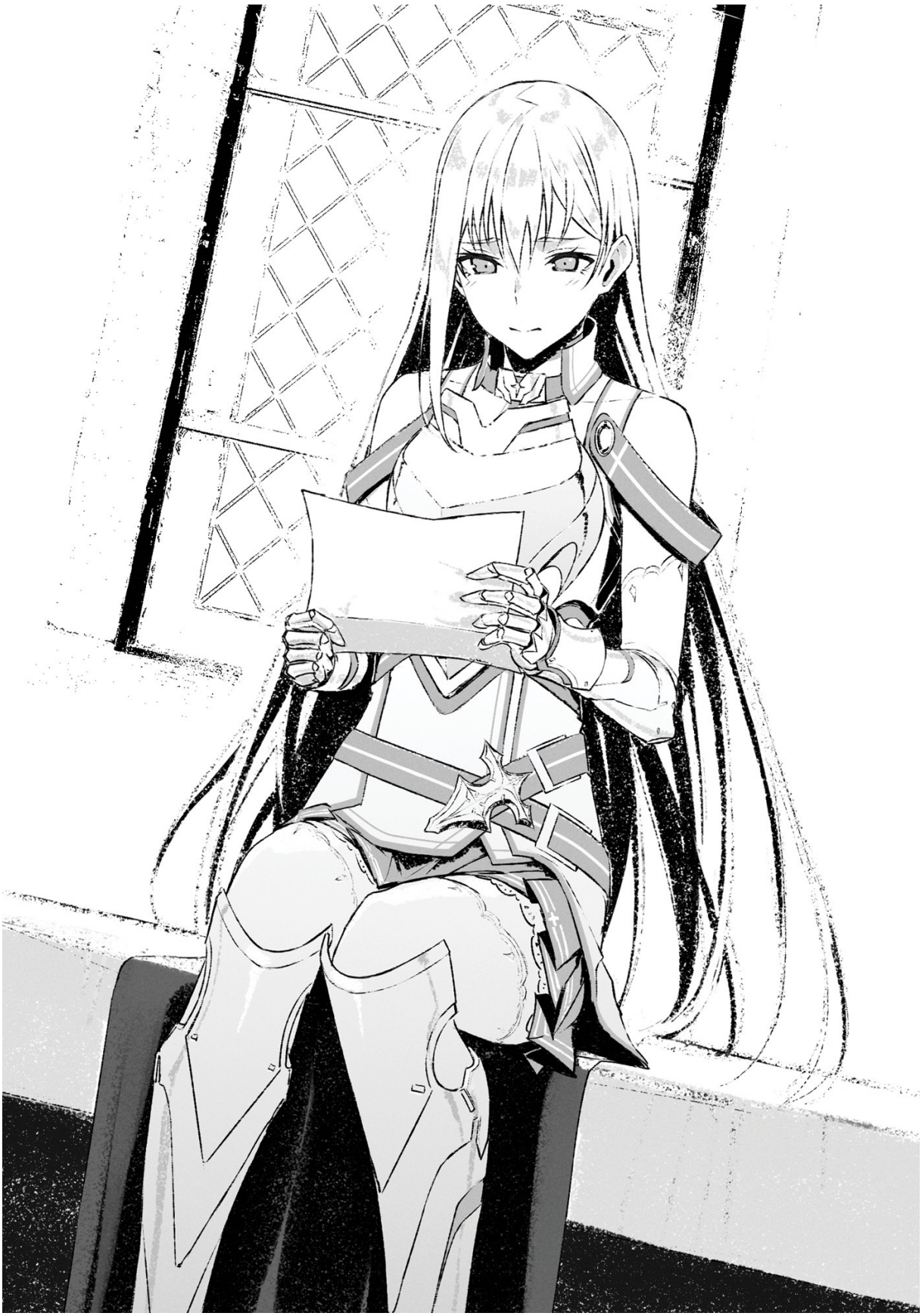
The Fate Graphite I knew was not a man who broke his word. I chose to believe him. I uncreased the letter, folded it, and placed it in my breast pocket.

For now, I would do what I could as the governor of Babylon. The city was in chaos with the death of the Divine Dragon, and I needed to settle that ruckus.

“Until we meet again, Fay,” I said to the stillness.

We would meet again. I knew it.

I opened the door, and I left the empty room.



Side Story:
Of Greed and Myne

FATE HAD DEFEATED the Divine Dragon. After devouring the soul of a beast in the Domain of E, he could no longer control Gluttony, and he was mere moments from losing himself to his skill. Imagine my surprise when right at that moment, that jerk decided to give me all his stats.

Being a weapon, it wasn't like I had any way of stopping him. I just had to take them. In doing so, I transformed into my Fourth Level—the black stave—and was summarily thrown from his grasp.

I figured it was in character for Fate to do something stupid like that.

Right as he's about to lose himself to his Gluttony, he weakens himself by giving me all the stats he has left, then he throws me away. Yeah, that's very much something a ridiculous guy like Fate would do.

Usually, when I hit a new level, I'd take some time to explain to the boy just how the weapon worked. Usually, we had a little time for me to do that. It was a pity we didn't this time around.

It was also a pity to think that this moment might be the end of our journey. To me, Fate looked to be at his very limit. As I rolled along the ground of the Galian wasteland, there was nothing I could do but watch him.

This situation was far from what Myne had hoped for when Fate asked for her help. But she was also painfully aware of the consequences when a person could no longer control their Gluttony, so I knew in the end she would do what she had to.

As I expected, Myne took her black axe Sloth in hand, and she prepared to bring it down upon Fate's neck as he knelt on the ground.

So long, Fate… It was a short time, but hell, it was a good one.

Just as I thought my parting words, a blonde girl dove in, tackling Fate before Myne's axe found its target.

"You can't!" she cried.

It was Roxy, who should've evacuated with her troops. She grabbed hold of Fate, and together they rolled along the ground, kicking up clouds of dust. They came to a stop right by my side.

What happened next could only be called a miracle. Fate's Gluttony reacted to some part of Roxy, and it began to calm. That showed that Roxy was now Fate's bastion. But to think that Fate's reason for coming here was his bastion… It meant that Gluttony would once again desire that which was most important to its bearer.

For the time being, Fate was saved. We could deal with the little details later. Now was a time to be glad. I looked over at the two of them, deeply happy that it had all worked out.

Roxy scooped up the unconscious Fate to carry him back to the sentinel city of Babylon, and it was time for me, the mighty Greed, to return with them.

Roxy had her hands and head full of Fate, so it was understandable that she didn't notice me. It was unavoidable, really. So, I just had to wait for Myne to pick me up, and off we'd go together.
Or so I thought. However, Myne didn't even glance in my direction as she followed Roxy and Fate on their way back to Babylon.
"Hey! Hey! You must be joking! How can you not notice me?! I'm right here! You put on that expressionless face, but I know you freaked out back there, Myne!"
I said a lot more, but all my words fell on deaf ears—which was also unavoidable. Without the Telepathy skill, nobody heard my voice. Time passed, and the three of them faded into the distance until they were little more than a dot in the wasteland.
"Alas, the mighty Greed has been abandoned…"
An unbelievable turn of events. It was unfathomable to think I could be left here, abandoned next to a gaping crevice, sitting among the scars of battle that Fate, Envy, and the Divine Dragon had carved into the earth.
"Well, once everyone calms down, I'm certain they'll notice I'm missing. Fate is sure to come bounding back out in search of me!"
I was optimistic at first, so I simply waited for someone to return for me.
A few hours after that, a wolf came sniffing around where I lay. Its silver fur told me it was a beast known as a desert wolf. It was one of the few survivors of the death parade. The wolf sniffed all over the place, and eventually, it stood over me.
"Woof woof! Woof!"
The beast's bark was surprisingly cute. It was no bigger than a regular-sized dog, so it looked a lot like your run-of-the-mill furry friend. Then the desert wolf started licking me. Admittedly, I was coated in monster blood from the battle.
"Hey! You stop that this instant! I'm going to get all sticky with your gross wolf saliva!"
I was still in my Fourth Level form, the black stave. I was slim and elegant and didn't have any edges, unlike the black sword, so the wolf had no trouble cleaning the blood right off me. I tried to transform back into the black sword, but because I'd just reached the Fourth Level and Fate was gone, I couldn't. Once the desert wolf was done licking me all over and covering me in drool, I don't know what the furry beast was thinking, but… it picked me up in its jaws.
"Oi! Stop it, you scruffy idiot! Let me go!"
"Woof woof!"
"Don't you dare woof at me, you dumb dog! Release me! I am Greed!"
"Woof!"
The desert wolf took off, its tail wagging in excitement. Maybe not all was lost. The monsters of Galia tended to head north, toward the kingdom.
Maybe this beast will bring me closer to Babylon! I thought.
Once again, my hopes were crushed.

“Hey, you stupid dog! You’re supposed to run the other way!”
I hurled all sorts of insults at the beast, but the damn thing didn’t have Telepathy, so all my shouting fell on deaf, pointy ears.
Thus was the mighty Greed carried farther and farther south. The city of Babylon became a distant memory.
“Woof woof woof woof!” the wolf barked happily.
“Just how far do you plan on going?!”
As a weapon without arms or legs, I was rendered completely helpless. After a time, I got tired of coming up with new insults for my scruffy captor, so I let out a long sigh and stared at the Galian scenery. The wolf and I had reached the strange moss I’d warned Fate about, the kind that grew in human shapes and occasionally spewed spores. We’d traveled *very* far south.
The green spores hung in the air like a thick mist. I knew that was dangerous. If you breathed in too many of those spores, they’d take root in your lungs. Your everyday adventurer either took a long detour around the moss, or, if they had confidence in their stats, ran directly through.
The desert wolf was clearly the latter type. In the next instant, we burst through to the other side of the mist. The wolf showed no sign of slowing, and it woofed happily as it carried me deeper into the heart of Galia.
“Hey, isn’t that the great canyon?”
I could see it on the horizon. I’d been there with Fate not so long ago, looking for the duskstone crystals Jade needed to make my beautiful new scabbard. The canyon was perhaps the only green place in the Galian wasteland. It was also a place of mysterious power, and it drew monsters. I couldn’t help but laugh; this was going to be interesting!
Just as I expected, the desert wolf continued to run as though drawn, deeper and deeper into the great canyon.
“This is your final destination, doggo.”
Still clasped in the desert wolf’s jaws, I bounded with it into the great canyon. The air was clear and free of the bloody stench of Galia, and greenery grew all around us. The best-case scenario would be if the desert wolf dropped me beside a big tree, so I could relax in the shade and wait for a savior. I had no real idea when the beast would come to a stop, though.
We passed piles of monsters who had taken their last breaths in the canyon and turned to stone over many long years, and before I knew it…we’d passed through the canyon completely.
“Woof! Wooof!”
“No! I don’t believe it! We’re out of the canyon?!”
In moments, the great canyon was far off in the distance. The desert wolf had spat in the face of my last hopes, and now I had no idea where this dumb mutt was headed.
We neared the heart of Galia, where the road ahead led only to danger. The center of Galia was home to a large number of sleeping chimeras, and the monsters on its outskirts were incomparably fierce. If the desert wolf left

me anywhere within this wilderness, my chances of being found plummeted. On top of that, it was unlikely Fate would ever even think that I'd been taken so far into the so-called country of death.

"We might literally be headed for the point of no return…" I groaned.

It was hard to believe that *this* would be the place of my eternal slumber. Just as I imagined my deeply dull future, we passed through the ruins of a small village. The wolf had been running in a stubborn straight line, but for the first time, it changed direction.

In that moment, I made up my mind. I would stop this damn wolf!

The buildings in that village had crumbled over many long years. Now, little more than dusty, fallen walls remained. Even as the earth slowly consumed the village, you could still see that this had once been a lively place. As we neared the biggest building, the desert wolf at last came to a stop.

"Finally!"

That relief only lasted for an instant. A black shape swooped in close, and I suddenly found myself lifted into the sky.

"Caw! Caw!"

These were the ridiculous cries of a colorful monster known as a roc. That garish bird had stolen me right from the jaws of the desert wolf! The roc's wings were an ostentatious rainbow of red, blue, yellow, and green; the seven colors that made up its plumage were often used for decorative purposes. This beast was drawn to shiny objects, so the handsome black glimmer of my stave had doubtless attracted it.

The desert wolf grimaced and howled with an anger I'd never heard from a mutt until that very moment. As for me, I couldn't just let myself fly to the far ends of the sky. It was said that rocs built their nests in extremely high places, where it was difficult for enemies to get to them. This deep in Galia, that meant one obvious building: the soaring, thousand-meter-tall tower at the heart of the region. It was bad enough to be so deep in Galia, but *that* was the one place I *really* didn't want to go.

"Let go of me, you damn bird!"

"Woof!"

Just as the roc prepared to launch even higher, the desert wolf bounded off a nearby building and leaped into the air.

"Oh, what's this?"

Amazingly, the wolf reached the roc and sank its fangs into the monstrous bird's wings. The roc let out a shriek of pain. Its grip on me faltered, and I slipped away, falling to the earth and out of immediate danger. The wolf let out another howl, a proud roar at having scared the roc off its prize.

The roc fluttered away on broken wings, into the distance of the heart of Galia, where I assumed its nest was.

Phew. That had been close. "You did amazing, you stupid dog! Got some bite to go with your bark, huh?"

"Woof!"

I was so glad that the roc hadn't taken me to that central tower that I even praised the little woofer. Then I noticed the desert wolf digging a hole in the ground with its front paws.
I have a bad feeling about this...
"I knew it! I was a fool for ever wasting a kind word on you!"
The desert wolf finished digging and dropped me into its hole. The roc's attack had taken it by surprise, and now it wanted to hide me somewhere safe as soon as possible. As quickly as the roc had lifted me into the skies, the wolf buried me under the earth. It piled dirt over me, and my vision clouded over.
"You're burying me alive?! How could you?!"
"Woof woof."
"Don't think you can fool me with that cute bark of yours! Stop covering me with dirt!"
"Woof!"
The desert wolf looked delighted as it buried me.
"Damn it... I can't let myself get buried alive in a place like this..."
The wolf barked with satisfaction once it entombed me. It liked me so much that it didn't want anyone else to take me away. I could only laugh.
"If only I weren't so cool and popular... Damn these good looks!"
The wolf had left me to rest under the ground, against my wishes. The desert earth was chilly as it settled around me. I found myself getting sleepy. I fought the urge, but with time, I felt my consciousness fade somewhere far, far away.

***

I woke to the sound of a dog's high-pitched squeal.
Little by little, I felt the weight of the earth that covered me grow lighter. Soon, I saw faint light through gaps in the dirt. Could it be? Was I saved?
"Fate? Is that you?"
It wasn't who I was hoping for. A young girl stood before me. A girl with white hair, red eyes, and a giant black axe that looked odd against her petite frame. She picked me up from my hole, her face showing not even a hint of emotion at our reunion.
"Why would you bury yourself out this far?" she asked. "Do you know how hard it was to find you?"
"Myne! I wouldn't be in this unbelievable predicament if you hadn't left me out in the wild while you all traipsed back to Babylon!"
"I came back for you. But you never have been very lucky. Not for a long time."
"You shut your mouth."
Like Fate, Myne had the Telepathy skill. That meant I could give her a piece of my mind. Or just throw all of it at her at once.

“Sloth is so quiet, but you’re so loud,” Myne said, a slight furrow in her brow.
“It’s not that I’m loud, it’s that Sloth is always sleeping!”
“I think I’ve changed my mind. You seem to like it better here.” Myne tossed me back in the hole she’d just dug me out of. “I’ll let Fate know that you didn’t want to come back.”
“Wait! Wait! Hold your horses, calm down, and let’s talk about this like adults, yeah?”
She’d come out all this way to find me, and now she was just going to leave me to rot? Fate would never have done something so rash. But Myne was concerning. She really was dangerous.
“Anyway, how’s Fate doing?” I asked.
“He’s unconscious. Still sleeping.”
“I see… Not surprising. How long has it been since he defeated the Divine Dragon? I lost track of time, stuck out here in the dirt.”
“Four days.”
More time than I thought. I had to get back, and soon. If Fate was still sleeping when I returned, I’d give him a light poke with the tip of the black sword. I was still the black stave at the moment, but enough time had passed that I could probably change forms myself. I gave it a shot, and thankfully, it worked. I returned to the form of the black sword.
“If you’re going to change forms, at least tell me. You startled me.”
“Sorry, sorry.”
“As always, Greed, you’re very light. You could do with a little heft. Like Sloth.”
The gall of this girl. I was about to give her another piece of my mind, but I fell into silence instead. I really didn’t like the idea of Myne reburying me.
“By the way, have you seen a desert wolf around here?” I asked. “It’s the monster that brought me all the way to this dump and buried me.”
“The dog is over there. It got in my way, so I knocked it out cold with a light tap to the skull.”
I followed Myne’s gaze and saw the desert wolf splayed on the ground, unconscious, drool leaking from its jaw. For some reason, I was glad to see it alive, versus, say, cut in half by Myne’s axe. For all the rude things I had to say about it, there was still something loveable about the mutt.
“Should I kill it?” she asked me.
“Leave it,” I said. “Shouldn’t we be getting back to Babylon?”
“Yes.”
Still, it was curious that Sloth had remained quiet all this time. I asked Myne about it, and of course, it turned out the black axe was still deep in slumber.
“That stupid axe spends more time asleep than it does awake. I feel like I could count the amount of times it’s been awake on one hand.”
“Sleep is important for a growing weapon!”

Why did she look so proud of that? Well, whatever. I decided to ask about something nagging me—namely, what Myne had been doing out here after she parted with Fate.
“It’s a secret,” Myne said.
“I knew you’d say that. Then let me guess. You’ve been looking for the door to his land, haven’t you?”
Myne remained silent. I was right. But she should have known better than anyone. If that door still existed, it was better not to dig around for it.
“Well, you do what you like,” I said. “Clearly, it’s something you can’t let go of. But let me say this: Don’t go getting Fate involved. He only just made it to the Domain of E, and that was an ordeal in itself. It’s much too early for him.”
“Understood.”
I hoped she really did understand. Fate’s natural impulse was to help. If he knew about Myne’s situation, he’d feel obliged to step in. Then there was the matter of his Gluttony. He’d pushed it past his limit multiple times in the battle with the Divine Dragon. This time, things had worked out, but I wasn’t confident he would be so lucky a second time.
Myne left the ruins of the village and headed north. She was fast. Her strength was on a whole other level compared to Fate. She ran as though cutting through the wind itself until a horde of orcs appeared, blocking her path. There were more than three hundred of them.
“Pests,” she said, without emotion.
Myne had me gripped in her left hand, and I felt power surge into it. For a brief instant, I had a terrible feeling, almost a premonition of what was about to happen. Then Myne launched me like a lance right at the horde of orcs.
“Myne! I’ll remember this!” I shouted.
Myne ran at full speed down the path she’d carved through the orcs with my blade.
“Yes!” she cried.
What does she mean, ‘yes’?! She knows I hate being used like this!
“Good job,” Myne said as she picked me back up.
“Good job?! Why didn’t you use Sloth?! Sloth is your weapon!”
“I just felt like doing this.”
She wasn’t handling me with any care whatsoever. I couldn’t wait to get back to where I belonged, with someone who treated me with due respect.
Myne launched me through the orcs like a common lance another five times. At least she made sure to collect me after each throw, but I was utterly filthy with all sorts of orc blood and guts.
“You are a mess,” Myne said.
“I wonder whose fault that is?!”
“All right, I’ll clean you up.”

Myne took a canteen from her back and splashed me with some water. That was it. Now, I knew that water was a precious resource out in Galia, but I had still hoped for a good scrubbing. It was what Fate would have done.
"I want you to scrub me," I said.
"No. Too annoying."
My request drifted away, unanswered, like dust on the wind. For all his complaining, Fate always did what I wanted. I supposed that was the difference between the true owner of a weapon and anybody else. In any case, I was grateful to be at least a little cleaner.
In the distance, I saw the battlefield where Myne and Fate had fought Haniel.
"You feeling okay, what with Fate devouring Luna?" I asked.
"There was no other way…"
"That's not an answer."
"I'm grateful. I couldn't just leave my little sister like that."
"I see. Well, I visited her inside Gluttony during the last battle. She's doing quite well, considering."
"I'm glad…"
Myne said nothing more, just increased the speed of her steps. It was like she was putting the old village and the battle of Haniel out of her mind by more quickly putting it out of our sight. She was a girl of little expression, yet she was in some ways very easy to read.
On my way into Galia, trapped in the clutches of the desert wolf, I was unsure of where we were headed. But with Myne, I felt safe, knowing we would end up at the place where Fate now slept. When we got back, I'd have to give her a real lecture on how to properly handle me. When we got back.
"Who's looking after Fate?" I asked.
"Roxy. She's very diligent."
Fate would be happy to hear that when he woke.
"However," Myne added, "she's sad that he lost his arm."
"Well, we can fix that, so it's nothing to worry about. Anyway, you came quite a way to search for me."
"Eris scolded me," Myne said. I sensed she didn't want to say much about the episode. "It was scary," she added.
"Must have been quite the scolding if it left the bearer of Wrath shaking in her boots."
"After the battle was over, I went back out to look for you, but you were gone. I followed your energy. I didn't think you would be buried so near the heart of Galia, however."
She made it sound like a complaint, but none of that was my fault. If she wanted to get mad, she needed to blame the desert wolf. It was that stupid dog's fault. It had done whatever it pleased with me!
"I really thought I was done for," I said.
"I will only do this once. If you go out that far again, you're on your own."

She spoke the way she always spoke, but Myne cared more than she let on. It had been the same when she traveled with Fate. She saw right away that Fate was a complete novice when it came to the art of war, so she taught him in her own way, without words, by taking the lead and fighting in front of him. Little things like that added up. I knew that was a big reason why Fate was able to make it as far as he had.

The landscape changed to strange moss. Once we were past this, Babylon was only a little farther away.

"Don't be so cold, Myne," I said.

"There are things I still have to do."

"Yeah, like find the door to his land. Will you watch over Fate until you get more information on that? His condition is still unstable. I think having you around will give him some confidence."

Myne thought for a short time before answering. "Okay."

There was something of a sad look in Myne's eyes. I knew the reason for it well. For those who lived as long as we did, life got a little heavier with each new face, each new farewell. Spending a long time with someone only made that farewell harder.

Myne knew that if she stayed with Fate, eventually, they would part. She knew where that road led, and she could see how it ended. She'd traveled it often.

"It's selfish of me to ask this of you, I know," I said. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine. I enjoy being with Fate."

For Myne, it was better to forget the coming farewell and instead enjoy the present moment.

The heavily armored walls of Babylon rose before us. Somewhere within those walls, in the Military Sector, Fate was receiving treatment. It was time for me to get ready for a fresh start and rejoin my companion.

There were things yet to do, and Fate and I would soon need to put Babylon behind us.

Afterword

AT LONG LAST, Berserk of Gluttony, Volume Three.

Last year in January, when I started updating regularly on *Let's Be Novelists*, I never imagined my story would end up published like this. At the time, what pushed me forward was just my feeling that a story about the seven deadly sins, in which the main character stole stats, would be interesting. I didn't really have a plot. I didn't even have the idea for Fate's now-indispensable partner, Greed!

Greed was a character I really came up with as I wrote. I had thoughts like, "Well, because of Fate's personality and position, he's going to do a lot on his own. In that case, I wonder what it would be like if I gave him a talking sword? That might work! If I make that sword one of the seven deadly sins, I can deepen the link between it and Fate. Also, because Fate is quiet and gentle at heart, I can give the sword a bigger, brasher, and more confident personality. And because Fate doesn't have parents, it would be nice for the sword to play something of a parent/big brother role."

Those kinds of thoughts really solidified Greed's character. I'm very attached to him now, to the point that—because he's with Fate all the time—I sometimes imagine that perhaps Greed's the true heroine of the novel, so to speak. Of course, Fate would say that it's clear the role belongs to Lady Roxy. However, well, you see.

In this third volume, Roxy plays a smaller role than in the first, but I think she appears at key points. This is quite different from the original web version of the novel, so I hope readers find these new sections exciting. They're something my editor was really on my back about, and I think it turned out for best. A big thanks to my editor!

This volume also featured the battle with the Divine Dragon, a monster I introduced in Volume One as a fearsome enemy. Some might point out that the Divine Dragon went down rather quickly. At first, I wondered whether it would be better for the battle to go way crazier at the start. However, after rethinking the storyline, I wondered if what happened next was what Fate really wanted…and so, the story went the way I presented it here. As the author, I hope this helps you see Roxy as a powerful heroine.

Once again, fame handled the illustrations. Every time I see a finished illustration, I'm always so impressed by how beautifully drawn it is, right down to the fine details. Until now, readers couldn't really see Fate's new armor and equipment, but in this volume his gear burst into the spotlight. Fame's design really captures it. The same is true for the new character on the cover, Eris. Fame thought of her outfit, and it really makes her Lust skill easy to imagine. It's not just sexy, it's also very cool. Thank you so much, fame!

The supervising editor helped me out more than usual in this volume. It was released at the same time as the manga, and I’m sure I caused a lot of trouble on account of my inexperience. When I look back, that editor has helped me for more than a year and a half! In its own quiet way, a lot has happened, but as long as the series continues, I hope you’ll keep supporting it!

Finally, I want to thank the people who have supported me online, and the people who read the books from Volume One all the way until now. Thank you so much!

See you again in Volume Four!

Creator Profiles

STORYISSHIKI ICHIKA
Fate’s goal ever since the first book has been to battle the Divine Dragon. In a way, this concludes that arc.

ILLUSTRATIONSFAME
It’s been a while since I drew boobs!

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